

DELL ETHEL MAY

THE HUNDREDTH
CHANCE

Ethel Dell

The Hundredth Chance

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Содержание

PART I	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	11
CHAPTER IV	15
CHAPTER V	18
CHAPTER VI	21
CHAPTER VII	26
CHAPTER VIII	29
CHAPTER IX	35
CHAPTER X	39
CHAPTER XI	43
CHAPTER XII	47
CHAPTER XIII	50
CHAPTER XIV	57
CHAPTER XV	60
CHAPTER XVI	65
CHAPTER XVII	69
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	72

Ethel M. Dell

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PART I

THE START

CHAPTER I

BEGGARS

"My dear Maud, I hope I am not lacking in proper pride. But it is an accepted-though painful-fact that beggars cannot be choosers."

Lady Brian spoke with plaintive emphasis the while she drew an elaborate initial in the sand at her feet with the point of her parasol.

"I cannot live in want," she said, after a thoughtful moment or two. "Besides, there is poor little Bunny to be considered." Another thoughtful pause; then: "What did you say, dear?"

Lady Brian's daughter made an abrupt movement without taking her eyes off the clear-cut horizon; beautiful eyes of darkest, deepest blue under straight black brows that gave them a somewhat forbidding look. There was nothing remarkable about the rest of her face. It was thin and sallow and at the moment rather drawn, not a contented face, and yet possessing a quality indefinable that made it sad rather than bitter. Her smile was not very frequent, but when it came it transfigured her utterly. No one ever pictured that smile of hers beforehand. It came so brilliantly, so suddenly, like a burst of sunshine over a brown and desolate landscape, making so vast a difference that all who saw it for the first time marvelled at the unexpected glow.

But it was very far from her face just now. In fact she looked as if she could never smile again as she said: "Bunny would sooner die of starvation than have you do this thing. And so would I."

"You are so unpractical," sighed Lady Brian. "And really, you know, dear, I think you are just a wee bit snobbish too, you and Bunny. Mr. Sheppard may be a self-made man, but he is highly respectable."

"Oh, is he?" said Maud, with a twist of the lips that made her look years older than the woman beside her.

"I'm sure I don't know why you should question it," protested Lady Brian. "He is extremely respectable. He is also extremely kind, – in fact, a friend in need."

"And a beast!" broke in her daughter, with sudden passionate vehemence. "A hateful, familiar beast! Mother, how can you endure the man? How can you for a single moment demean yourself by the bare idea of-of marrying him?"

Lady Brian sighed again. "It isn't as if I had asked you to marry him," she pointed out. "I never even asked you to marry Lord Saltash, although-as you must now admit-it was the one great chance of your life."

Again Maud made that curious, sharp movement of hers that was as if some inner force urged her strongly to spring up and run away.

"We won't discuss Lord Saltash," she said, with lips that were suddenly a little hard.

"Then I don't see why we should discuss Giles Sheppard either," said Lady Brian, with a touch of querulousness. "Of course I know he doesn't compare well with your poor father. Second husbands so seldom do-which to my mind is one of the principal objections to marrying twice. But-as I said

before-beggars cannot be choosers and something has got to be sacrificed, so there is an end of the matter."

Maud turned her eyes slowly away from the horizon, swept with them the nearer expanse of broad, tumbling sea, and finally brought them to rest upon her mother's face.

Lady Brian was forty-five, but she looked many years younger. She was a very pretty woman, delicate-featured, softly-tinted, with a species of appealing charm about her that all but the stony-hearted few found it hard to resist. She put her daughter wholly in the shade, but then Maud never attempted to charm anyone. She had apparently no use for the homage that was as the very breath of life to her mother's worldly little soul. She never courted popularity. All her being seemed to be bound up in that of her young brother who had been a helpless cripple from his babyhood, and dependent upon her care. The ten years that stretched between them were as nought to these two. They were pals; and if the boy tyrannized freely over her, she was undoubtedly the only person in the world for whom he entertained the smallest regard. She had lavished all a mother's love upon him during the whole of his fifteen years, and she alone knew how much had been sacrificed before the shrine of her devotion. He filled all the empty spaces in her heart.

But now-now that they were practically penniless-the great question arose: Who was to provide for Bunny? Lady Brian had lived more or less comfortably upon credit for the past five years. It was certainly not her fault that this bruised reed had broken at last in her hand. She had tried every device to strengthen it. And then too there had always been the possibility that Maud might marry Lord Saltash, who was extremely wealthy and-by fits and starts-very sedulous in his attentions.

It was of course very unfortunate that he should have been connected with that unfortunate scandal in the Divorce Court; but then everyone knew that he had led a somewhat giddy life ever since his succession to the title. Besides, nothing had been proved, and the unlucky affair had fallen through in consequence. It was really too absurd of Maud to treat it seriously, if indeed she had treated it seriously. Not being in her daughter's confidence, Lady Brian was uncertain on this point. But, whatever the circumstances, Charlie Saltash had obviously abandoned his allegiance. And Maud-poor girl! – had no one else to fall back upon. Of course it was very sweet of her to devote herself so unsparingly to dear little Bunny, but Lady Brian was privately of the opinion that she wasted a good deal of valuable time in his service. She was twenty-five already, and-now that the crash had come-little likely to find another suitor.

They had come down to this cheery little South Coast resort to recruit and look around them. Obviously something would have to be done, and done very quickly, or they would end their days in the workhouse.

Lady Brian had relations in the North, but, as she was wont to express it, they were not inclined to be kind to her. Her runaway marriage with Sir Bernard Brian in her irresponsible girlhood had caused something of a split between them. The wild Irish baronet had never been regarded with a favourable eye, and her subsequent sojourn in Ireland had practically severed all connection with them.

Sir Bernard's death and her subsequent migration to London had not healed the breach. She was regarded as flighty and unreliable. There was no knowing what her venture might be, and, save for a very occasional correspondence with an elderly bachelor uncle who was careful not to betray too keen an interest in her affairs, she was left severely alone.

Therefore she had too much pride to ask for help, sustaining herself instead upon the kindness of friends till even this prop at length gave way; and she, Maud and poor little Bunny (whose very empty title was all he possessed in the world) found themselves stranded at Fairharbour at the dead end of the season with no means of paying their way even there.

Not wholly stranded, however! Lady Brian had stayed at Fairharbour before at the Anchor Hotel down by the fishing-quay-"the Anchovy Hotel" Bunny called it on account of its situation. It was not a very high-class establishment, but Lady Brian had favoured it on a previous occasion because Lord Saltash had a yacht in the vicinity, and it had seemed such a precious opportunity for dear Maud. He

also had large racing-stables in the neighbourhood of the downs behind the little town, and there was no knowing when one or other of his favourite pastimes might tempt him thither.

Nothing had come of the previous visit, however, save a pleasant, half-joking acquaintance with Mr. Sheppard, the proprietor of the Anchor Hotel, during the progress of which Lady Brian's appealing little ways had laid such firm hold of the worthy landlord's rollicking fancy that she had found it quite difficult to tear herself away.

Matters had not then come to such a pass, and she had finally extricated herself with no more than a laughing promise to return as soon as the mood took her. Maud had been wholly unaware of the passage between them which had been of a very slight and frothy order; and not till she found herself established in some very shabby lodgings within a stone's throw of the Anchor Hotel did the faintest conception of her mother's reason for choosing Fairharbour as their city of refuge begin to dawn in her brain.

She was very fully alive to it now, however, and hotly, furiously resentful, albeit she had begun already to realize (how bitterly!) that no resentment on her part could avert the approaching catastrophe. As Lady Brian pathetically said, something had got to be sacrificed.

And there was Bunny! She could not leave Bunny to try to earn a living. He was utterly dependent upon her-so dependent that it did not seem possible that he could live without her. No, she could see no way of escape. But it was too horrible, too revolting! She was sure, too, that her mother had a sneaking liking for the man, and that fact positively nauseated her. That awful person! That bounder!

"So, you see, dear, it really can't be helped," Lady Brian said, rising and opening her sunshade with a dainty air of finality. "Why his fancy should have fallen upon me I cannot imagine. But-all things considered-it is perhaps very fortunate that it has. He is quite ready to take us all in, and that, even you must admit, is really very generous of him."

Maud's eyes travelled again to the far sky-line. They had a look in them as of a caged thing yearning for freedom.

"It is getting late," said Lady Brian.

Sharply she turned. "Mother," she said, "I shall write to Uncle Edward. This is too much. I am sure he will not condemn us to this."

Lady Brian sighed a trifle petulantly. "You will do as you like, dear, no doubt. But pray do not write on my account! Whatever he may be moved to do or say can make no difference to me now."

"Why not?" Curtly her daughter put the question. The beautiful brows were painfully drawn.

"Because," said Lady Brian plaintively, "it will be too late-so far as I am concerned."

"What do you mean?" Again, almost like a challenge, the girl flung the question.

Lady Brian began to walk along the beach. "I mean, dear, that I have promised to give Mr. Sheppard his answer to-night."

"But-but-Mother-" there was almost a cry in the words, "you can't-you can't have quite decided upon what the answer will be!"

Lady Brian sighed again. "Oh, do let us have a little common-sense!" she said, with just a touch of irritation. "Of course I have decided. The decision has been simply thrust upon me. I had no choice."

"Then you mean to say Yes?" Maud's voice fell suddenly flat. She turned her face again to the open sea, a glint of desperation in her eyes.

"Yes," said Lady Brian very definitely. "I mean to say Yes."

"Then Heaven help us!" said Maud, under her breath.

"My dear, don't be profane!" said Lady Brian.

CHAPTER II

THE IDOL

"I say, Maud, what a dratted long time you've been! What on earth have you and the mother been doing?" Young Bernard Brian turned his head towards his sister with the chafing, impatient movement of one bitterly at variance with life. "You swore you wouldn't be long," he said.

"I know. I'm sorry." Maud came to his side and stooped over him. "I couldn't help it, Bunny," she said. "I haven't been enjoying myself."

He looked up at her suspiciously. "Oh, it's never your fault," he said, with dreary sarcasm.

Maud said nothing. She only laid a smoothing hand on his crumpled brow, and after a moment bent and kissed it.

He jerked his head away from her caress, opening and shutting his hands in a nervous way he had acquired in babyhood. "I've had a perfectly sickening time," he said. "There's a brute with a gramophone upstairs been driving me nearly crazy. For goodness' sake, see if you can put a stop to it before to-night comes! I shall go clean off my head if you don't!"

"I'll do my best, dear," Maud promised.

"I wish to goodness we could get away from this place," the boy said restlessly. "Even the old 'Anchovy' was preferable. I loathe this hole."

"Oh, so do I!" said Maud, with sudden vehemence. And then she checked herself quickly as if half-ashamed. "Of course it might be worse, you know, Bunny," she said.

Bunny curled a derisive lip, and looked out of the window.

"Did you really like 'The Anchor' better?" Maud asked, after a moment.

He drew his brows together-beautiful brows like her own, betraying a sensitive, not too well-balanced temperament. "It was better," he said.

Maud sat down beside his sofa with a slight gesture of weariness. "You would like to go back there?" she asked.

He looked at her sharply. "We are going?"

She met his look with steady eyes. "Mr. Sheppard has offered to take us in," she said.

The boy frowned still more. "What! For nothing?" he said.

"No; not for nothing." The girl was frowning too-the frown of one confronted with a difficult task. "Nobody ever does anything for nothing," she said.

"Well? What is it?" Bunny's eyes suddenly narrowed and became shrewd. "He doesn't want you to marry him, I suppose?"

"Good gracious, Bunny!" Maud gasped the words in sheer horror. "What ever made you think of that?"

Bunny laughed-a cracked, difficult laugh. "Because he's boulder enough for anything; and you're so beastly fond of him, aren't you?"

"Oh, don't!" Maud said. "Really don't, Bunny! It's too horrible to joke about. No, it isn't me he wants to marry. It's-it's-"

"The mother?" queried Bunny, without perturbation. "Oh, he's quite welcome to her. It's a pity he's been such a plaguey time making up his mind. He might have known she'd jump at him."

"But, Bunny-" Maud was gazing at him in utter amazement. There were times when the working of her young brother's brain was wholly beyond her comprehension. "You can't be-pleased!" she said.

"I'm never pleased," said Bunny sweepingly. "I hate everything and everybody-except you, and you don't count. The man's a brute of course; but if the mother has a mind to marry him, why on earth shouldn't she? Especially if it's going to make us more comfortable!"

"Comfortable on his money!" There was scorn unutterable in Maud's voice. Her eyes were tragically proud.

"But, why not?" said Bunny, with cynical composure. "We shall never be comfortable on our own, that's certain. If the man is fool enough to want to lay out his money in that way, why, let him!"

"Live on his-charity!" said Maud very bitterly.

The boy's mouth twisted. "We've got to live on someone's," he said. "There's nothing new in that. I think you're rather an ass, Maud. It's no good being proud when you can't afford it. We can't earn a living for ourselves, so someone must do it for us, that's all."

"Bunny!" There was passionate protest in the exclamation; but he passed it by.

"What's the good of arguing?" he said irritably. "We can't help ourselves. If the mother would rather marry that bawling beast Sheppard than starve on a doorstep with us, who's to blame her? I suppose we're included in the bargain for good, are we?"

Maud nodded mutely, her fingers locked and straining against each other.

Bunny screwed his face up for a moment. Then: "There's that filthy gramophone again!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Go and stop it, I say! I can't bear the noise! I won't bear it! It's-it's-it's infernal! That's what it is!" He flung his arms up frenziedly above his head, and then suddenly uttered an anguished cry of pain.

Maud was on her feet on the instant. She caught the arms, drew them firmly down again. "Oh, don't, dear, don't!" she said. "You know you can't!"

The boy's face was convulsed. "I didn't know! I can sometimes! Oh, Maud, I hate life! I hate it! I hate it!"

His voice choked, became a gasping moan, ceased altogether.

Maud stooped over him. His eyes were shut, his face white as death. "Bunny, Bunny darling!" she whispered passionately. "I would give-all the world-to make it better for you!"

There fell a silence, while gradually the awful paroxysm began to pass.

Then very abruptly Bunny opened his eyes. "No, you wouldn't!" he said unexpectedly.

"Indeed I would!" she said very earnestly.

"You wouldn't!" he reiterated, with the paralysing conviction that refuses to hear any reasoning. "If you would, you'd have married Lord Saltash years ago, and been rich enough to pay one of the big men to put me right."

She winced sharply. "Bunny! You're not to talk to me of Lord Saltash. It isn't kind. He is the one man in the world I-couldn't marry."

"Rot!" said Bunny. "You know you're in love with him."

"I know I couldn't marry him," she said, a piteous quiver in her voice. "It is cruel to-to-" She broke off.

"All right," said Bunny waiving the point. "Find some other rich man then! I don't care who it is. You'll have to pretty soon. We shall neither of us stand this Sheppard person for long."

"If I could only-somehow-make a living for the two of us!" the girl said.

"You can't!" Again deadly conviction swept aside argument. "You're not clever enough, and you haven't time-unless you propose to leave me to the tender mercies of the Sheppard. It would be a quick way out of the difficulty so far as I am concerned anyway."

"Of course I could never leave you!" Maud said quickly.

"All right then. Marry-and be quick about it!" said Bunny.

He turned his drawn, white face to the window-a face of unconscious pathos that often stirred his sister to the depths. Youth-and the gladness of youth-had never existed for Bunny Brian. Life for so long as he could remember had always been a long, dreary round of pain and disappointment, of restless nights and dragging, futile days. Only Maud, who shared them all, knew to the uttermost the woeful bitterness of the lad's existence. It hurt her cruelly, that bitterness, moving her to a perpetual self-sacrifice, of the extent of which even Bunny had small conception.

She identified herself completely with him, and had so done since the tenth year of her life when he had come-a puny, wailing baby-into the world to fill the void of her childish heart. She had,

as it were, grown up in his service, worn and sallow and thin, with the sharp edges of nerves that were always strung up to too high a pitch—the nerves of one who scarcely ever knew a whole night of undisturbed rest. They had told upon her, those years of anxiety and service; they had shorn away her youth also. Only once—and that for how short a time! – had life ever seemed desirable in her eyes. A brief and splendid dream had been hers, spreading like a golden sunrise over her whole horizon. But the dream had faded, the sunrise had been extinguished in heavy clouds that had never again parted. She knew life now for a grey, grey dreariness on which no light could ever shine again. She was tired-tired to the soul of her; and she was only twenty-five.

"Maud!" Bunny's voice half-irritable, half-eager, broke in upon her. "See that fellow down there trying to make his nag go into the sea? It's going to be a big job. Let's go down and see it done!"

Bunny's long chair was in a corner of the room. It was no light task to get it in and out of the house; but Maud was used to the management of it. The weight of it went in with the other burdens of life. She was used also to lifting Bunny's poor little wasted body, and no wish of his that she could gratify was ever left neglected. Moreover, the offensive clamour of the gramophone overhead added to her alacrity to obey his behests. And the day was bright and warm, with a south wind blowing over a sparkling sea.

It would do Bunny good to go out, especially if he desired to go. It was not always that he would consent to do so after a sleepless night. But there was an extraordinary vitality in the meagre frame, a fevered, driving force that never seemed to be wholly exhausted. There were times when inaction was absolute torture to him, and Maud was ready to go until she dropped if only she could in some measure alleviate that chafing restlessness. She counted it luck indeed if these moods of fret and turmoil raged during the day. She was better able to cope with them then, and it gave the night a better chance. Poor lad! He could fight his own way through the days, but the long-drawn-out misery of nights of incessant pain broke him down—how completely only Maud ever knew.

So, gladly she wheeled him forth on that afternoon of late October, down the hill to the sun-bathed shore.

That hill taxed her physical powers to the uttermost. Secretly she dreaded the ascent, but not for worlds would she have had Bunny know it—Bunny who depended solely upon her for the very few pleasures that ever came his way. To the last ounce of her strength she was dedicated to the service of her idol.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW ACQUAINTANCE

They reached the sunny stretch of parade in time to see the young chestnut that had excited Bunny's interest being coaxed along the edge of the water by his rider. The animal was covered with froth, and evidently in a ferment of nervous excitement. The man who rode him sat loosely in the saddle as if the tussle in progress were of very minor importance in his estimation. He kept the fretting creature's head turned towards the water, however, and at intervals he patted the streaming neck and spoke a few words of encouragement.

At Bunny's request his chair was drawn to the edge of the parade, and from here he and Maud watched the progress of the battle. A battle of wills it undoubtedly was, though there was nothing in the man's attitude to indicate any strain. He was obviously one who knew how to bide his time, thick-set, bull-necked, somewhat bullet-headed, with a face of even redness and a short, blunt nose that looked aggressively confident.

"Wonder if he'll do it," said Bunny.

Maud wondered too, realizing that the task would be no easy one. The horse was plainly on edge with apprehension, and her sympathies went out to him. Somehow she did not want to see him conquered. In fact, not greatly admiring the physiognomy of his rider, she hoped the horse would win.

Stepping with extreme daintiness, as if he expected the ground to open and swallow him, the animal sidled past, and she caught the gleam of a wicked eye as he went. There was mischief mingled with his fear. He evidently was not feeling particularly kindly disposed towards the man who rode him. The loose seat of the latter made her wonder if he were wholly aware of this.

"He'll be thrown if he isn't careful," she said, half to herself and half to Bunny, who was watching with the keenest interest.

"Hope he'll tumble into the water," said Bunny, who enjoyed dramatic situations.

The pair had passed them and were continuing their sidling progress along the beach. The man still appeared preoccupied, the horse still half-frightened, half-mischievous. Some fifty yards they covered thus; then the figure in the saddle slowly stiffened. Aware of an impending change of treatment, the animal began to jib with his head in the air. An odd little thrill went through Maud, a feeling as of electricity in the air. It was almost a sensation of foreboding. And then clean and grim as a pistol-shot, she heard the crack of a whip on the creature's quivering flank.

It was a well-earned correction, deliberately administered, one stinging cut, delivered with a calculation that knew exactly where to strike. But the horse, a young animal, leapt into the air as if he had been shot indeed, and landing again almost on the same spot began forwith to buck-jump in frenzied efforts to free himself of the task-master whose lash was so unerring.

The whip descended again with absolute precision. It looked almost like a feat of jugglery to Maud's fascinated eyes. The horse uttered a furious squeal. He was being forced, literally forced, into the hated water, and he knew it, set himself with all the fiery unreason of youth to resist, and incidentally to receive a punishment none the less painful on account of its extreme deliberation.

As for his rider, he kept his seat without apparent effort. He kept his temper also to all outward appearance. He even in the thick of the struggle abandoned force and tried coaxing again. It was only when this failed that it seemed to the watching girl that a certain quality of implacability began to manifest itself. His movements were no less studied, but they seemed to her to become relentless. From that moment she knew with absolute certainty that there could be but one end to the struggle.

Some dim suspicion of the same thing must have penetrated the animal's intelligence also, for almost from the same moment he seemed to lose heart. He still bucked away from the water and leapt in futile frenzy under the unsparing whip; but his fury was past. He no longer tried to fling his rider over his head. He seemed to be fighting to save his pride rather than for any other reason.

But his pride had to go. Endurance had its limits, and his smooth, clipped flanks were smarting intolerably. Very suddenly he gave in and walked into the water.

It foamed alarmingly round his legs, and he started in genuine terror and tried to turn; but on the instant a hand was on his neck, a square, sustaining hand that patted and consoled.

"Now, don't be a fool horse any longer!" said his conqueror. "Don't you know it's going to do you good? Go on and face it!"

He went on, splashing his rider thoroughly, first in sheer nervousness, later in undisguised content.

He came out of the water some five minutes later, a wiser and considerably less headstrong youngster than he had entered it, and walked serenely along the edge as if he had been accustomed to it all his life. When the spreading foam washed round his hoofs, he did not so much as lay an ear. He had surrendered his pride, and he did not seem to feel the sacrifice.

"A beastly tame ending!" said Bunny in frank disappointment. "I hoped the fellow was going to break his neck."

The horseman was passing immediately below them. He looked up, and Maud coloured a guilty scarlet, realizing that he had overheard the remark. He had the most startlingly bright eyes she had ever seen. They met hers with a directness that seemed to pierce straight through her, and passed on unblinkingly to the boy in the long chair. There was something lynx-like in the straight regard, something so deliberately intent that it seemed formidable. His clean-shaven, weather-beaten face had an untamed, primitive look about it, as of one born in the wilderness. His mouth was rugged rather than coarse, but it was not the mouth of civilization.

Bunny, who was not easily daunted, looked hard back at him, with the brazen expression of one challenging a rebuke. But the horseman refused the challenge, passing on without a word.

"I'm tired," said Bunny, in sudden discontent. "Let's go back!"

When he spoke in that tone, he was invariably beyond coaxing. Maud turned the chair without protest, and prepared to make that exhausting ascent.

"How slow you are to-day!" said Bunny peevishly. "I hate this beastly hill. You make me go up it on my head!"

The slant was certainly acute. Maud murmured sympathy. "I would pull you up if I could," she said.

"You've never even tried," said Bunny.

He was plainly in an exacting mood. Her heart sank a little lower. "It's no use trying, darling," she said. "I know I can't. But I won't take a minute longer over it than I can help."

"You never do anything decently," said Bunny in disgust.

Maud made no rejoinder. She bent in silence to her task.

Bunny could not see her face, and she strove desperately to control her panting breath.

"You puff like a grampus," the boy said discontentedly.

There came the quick fall of a horse's hoofs behind them, and Maud bent her flushed face a little lower. She did not want to meet that piercing regard again. But the hoof-beats slackened behind her, and a voice spoke—a voice so curiously soft that at the first sound she almost believed it to be that of a woman.

"Say! That's too heavy a job for you."

She paused—it was inevitable—and looked round.

In the same moment he slid to the ground—a square, sturdy figure, shorter than she had imagined him when he was in the saddle, horsey of aspect, clumsy of build, possessing a breadth of chest that seemed to indicate vast strength.

Again those extremely bright eyes met hers, red-brown, intensely alive. She felt as if they saw too much; they made her vividly conscious of her hot face and labouring heart. They embarrassed her, made her resentful.

She was too breathless to speak; perhaps she might not have done so in any case. But he did not wait for that. He pushed forward till he stood beside her.

"You take my animal!" he said. "He's quiet enough now."

She might have refused, had she had time to consider. But he gave her none. He almost thrust the bridle into her hands, and the next moment he had taken her place behind the invalid-chair and begun briskly to push it up the hill.

Maud followed, leading the now docile horse, divided between annoyance and gratitude. Bunny seemed struck dumb also, though whether with embarrassment or merely surprise she could not tell.

At the top of the steep ascent the stranger stopped and faced round. "Thanks!" he said briefly, and took his horse back into his own keeping.

Maud stood, feeling shy and awkward, while he set his foot in the stirrup. Then, ere he mounted, with a desperate effort she spoke.

"It was very kind of you. Thank you very much."

Her voice sounded coldly formal by reason of her extreme discomfiture. She would have given a good deal to have avoided speaking altogether. But the man stopped dead and looked at her as though she had attempted to detain him.

"You've nothing to thank me for," he said, in that queer, soft voice of his. "As I said before, it's too heavy a job for you. You'll get a groggy heart if you keep on with it."

There was no intentional familiarity in the speech; but it made her stiffen instinctively.

"It was very kind of you," she repeated, and with a bow that was even more freezingly polite than her words she turned to the chair and prepared to walk on.

But at this point Bunny suddenly found his voice in belated acknowledgment of the service rendered. "Hi! You! Stop a minute! Thanks for pushing me up this beastly hill!"

The stranger was still standing with his foot in the stirrup; but at the sound of Bunny's voice he took it out again and came to the boy's side, leading his horse.

"What a beauty!" said Bunny, admiringly. "Let me touch him, I say!"

"Oh, don't!" Maud said nervously. "He looked so savage just now."

"He's not savage," said the horse's owner, and pulled the animal's nose down to Bunny's eager, caressing hand.

The creature was plainly suspicious. He tried to avoid the caress, but his master and Bunny were equally insistent, and he finally submitted.

"He's not savage," his rider said again. "He's only young and a bit heady; wants a little shaping-like all youngsters."

Bunny's shrewd eyes flashed him a rapid glance, meeting the red-brown eyes deliberately scrutinizing him. With a certain blunt courage that was his, he tackled the situation.

"I say, did you hear what I said down on the parade?"

The man smiled a little, still watching Bunny's red face. "Did you mean me to hear?" he enquired.

"No," said Bunny, staring back, half-fascinated and half-defiant.

"All right then. I didn't," the horseman said.

Bunny's expression changed. He smiled; and when he smiled his lost youth looked out of his worn face. "Good for you!" he said. "I say, I hope we shall see you again some time."

"If you are here for long, you probably will," the man made answer.

"Do you live here?" Bunny's voice was eager. His eyes sparkled with interest.

The man nodded. "Yes, I'm a fixture. And you?"

"Oh, we're going to be fixtures too," said Bunny. "This is my sister Maud. I am Sir Bernard Brian."

Maud's ready blush rose burningly. She fidgeted to be gone. Bunny's swaggering announcement made her long to sink through the earth. She dreaded to hear his listener laugh, even looked up in surprise when no laugh came.

He was surveying Bunny with that same unblinking regard that had disconcerted her. The slight smile was still on his face, but it was not a derisive smile.

After a moment he said, "My name is Bolton-Jake Bolton. Think you can remember that?"

"What are you?" said Bunny, with frank curiosity.

"I?" The faint smile suddenly broadened, showing teeth that were large and very white. "I am a groom," the horseman said.

"Are you?" The boy's eyes opened wide. "Then you're not a mister!" he said.

"Oh no, I'm not a mister!" There was certainly a laugh in the womanish voice this time, but it held no open ridicule. "I'm plain Jake Bolton. You can call me Bolton or Jake-which ever you like. Good day, Sir Bernard!"

He backed his horse with the words, and mounted.

Maud did not look at him. She felt too overwhelmed. Moreover, she was sure-painfully sure-that he looked at her, and she thought there must be at least amusement in his eyes.

With relief she heard him turn his horse and trot down the hill. He had not even been going their way, then. Her face burned afresh.

"What a queer fish!" said Bunny. "Hullo! What are you so red about?"

"I wish you wouldn't tell people your title," she said. "They only laugh."

"He didn't laugh when I told him," said Bunny. "And why shouldn't I? I've a right to it."

He would not see her point she knew. But she made an attempt to explain. "He would have liked to call himself a gentleman," she said. "But-he didn't."

"That's quite different," said Bunny loftily. "He knows he isn't one."

Maud abandoned the argument then, because-though it was against her judgment-she found that she wanted to agree.

CHAPTER IV

THE ACCEPTED SUITOR

"Hark to the brute!" said Bunny.

A long, loud peal of laughter was echoing through the house. Maud shuddered at the sound. The noisy wooing of her mother's suitor made her feel physically sick. But for Bunny, she would have fled incontinently from the man's proximity. Because of Bunny, she sat at a rickety writing-table in a corner of the room and penned an urgent, almost a desperate, appeal to the bachelor uncle in the North to deliver them from the impending horror. No other consideration on earth would have forced such an appeal from her. She felt literally distraught that night. She was being dragged, a helpless prisoner, to the house of bondage.

Again came that loud, coarse laugh, and with it the opening of a door on the other side of the passage.

"Watch out!" warned Bunny. "They're coming!"

There was a hint of nervousness in his voice also. She heard it, and swiftly rose. When their own door opened, she was standing beside him, very upright, very pale, rigidly composed.

Her mother entered, flushed and smiling. Behind her came her accepted lover, – a large, florid man, handsome in ascertain coarse style, with a dissipated look about the eyes which told its own tale. Maud quivered in impotent resentment whenever she encountered those eyes. They could not look upon a woman with reverence.

He strolled into the room in her mother's wake, fondling a dark moustache, in evident good humour with himself and all the world.

Lady Brian ran to her daughter with all a girl's impetuosity. "My dear, it's all settled!" she declared. "Giles and I are going to be married, and we're all going to live at "The Anchor" with him. And dear little Bunny is to have the best ground-floor rooms. Now, isn't that kind?"

It was kind. Yet Maud stiffened to an even icier frigidity at the news, and dear little Bunny's nose turned up to an aggressive angle.

After a distinct pause, Maud bent her long neck and coldly kissed her mother's expectant face. "I hope you-and Mr. Sheppard will be very happy," she said.

The happy suitor broke into his loud, self-satisfied laugh. "Egad, what an enthusiastic reception!" he cried. "Have you got a similar chaste salute for me?"

He swaggered towards her, and Maud froze as she stood. Her eyes shot a blue flare of open enmity at him; and-almost in spite of himself-Giles Sheppard paused.

"By Jove!" he said. "You've got a she-wolf here, madam."

Lady Brian turned. "Oh, Giles, don't be absurd! Maud is not like me, you know. She was never demonstrative as a child. She was always shy and quiet. They are not quite used to the idea of you yet. You must give them time. Bunny darling, won't you give Mother a kiss?"

"What for?" said Bunny.

He was tightly gripping Maud's cold hand with fingers that were like tense wire. His eyes, very wide and bright, defied the whole world on her behalf.

"I'm not going to kiss anyone," he said. "Neither is Maud. I don't know what there is to make such a fuss about. You've both been married before."

The landlord of "The Anchor" gave a great roar of laughter. "Not bad for a bantling, eh, Lucy? Didn't know I was to have a sucking cynic for a step-son. You're quite right, my boy; there is nothing to make a fuss about. And so we shan't ask you to dance at the wedding. Not that you could if you tried, eh? And my Lady Disdain there won't be invited. We are going to be married by special licence to-morrow afternoon, and you can take possession of your new quarters while the knot is being tied. How's that appeal to you?"

Bunny looked at him with a certain grim interest. "It'll suit me all right," he said. "But I'm hanged if I can see where you come in."

Giles Sheppard laughed again with his tongue in his cheek. "Oh, I shall have my picking at the feast, old son," he declared jovially. "I've had my eye on your mother for a long time. Pretty piece of goods she is too. You're neither of you a patch on her. They don't do you credit, Lucy, my dear. Sure they're your own?"

"The man's drunk!" said Maud suddenly and sharply.

"My dear! My dear!" cried Lady Brian, in dismayed protest.

The girl bit her lip. The words had escaped her, she knew not how.

Giles Sheppard however only laughed again, and seated himself on the edge of the table to contemplate her.

"We shall have to try and find a husband for you, young woman," he said, "a husband who'll know how to bring you to heel. It'll be a tough job. I wonder who'd like to take it on. Jake Bolton might do the trick. We'll have Jake Bolton to dine with us to-morrow. He knows how to tame wild animals, does Jake. It's a damn' pretty sight to see him do it too. Gosh, he knows how to lay it on-just where it hurts most."

He chuckled grimly with his eyes on Maud's now crimson face.

"Now, Giles," protested Lady Brian, "you've promised to be good to my two children. I'm sure we shall all shake down comfortably presently. Dear Maud has a good deal to learn yet, so you must be patient with her. We were foolish ourselves at her age, I have no doubt."

"Oh, no doubt," said her fiancé, with his thick-lidded eyes still mocking the girl's face of outraged pride. "We've all been foolish in our time. But there's only one treatment for that complaint in the female species, my lady; and that is a sound good spanking. It does a world of good, takes the stiffening out of a woman in no time. I've had a daughter of my own-a decent little filly she was too. Married now and gone to Canada. But I had to keep her in order, I can tell you, before she went. I gave her many a slippering, and she thought the better of me for it too. She knew I wouldn't stand any of her nonsense."

"Oh, well," smiled Lady Brian, "we are not all alike, you know; and that sort of treatment doesn't suit everybody. Now I think we all know each other, and my little Bunny is looking rather tired. I think we won't stay any longer. It means a bad night if he gets excited."

"Wait a minute!" interposed Bunny. "That man you were talking about just now-Jake Bolton. Who is he? Where does he live?"

"Who is he?" Giles Sheppard slapped his thigh and rose. "He's one of the best-known fellows about here-a bit of a card, but none the worse for that. He's the trainer up at the stables-Lord Saltash's place. Never heard of him? He's known as 'The Lynx' on the turf, because he's so devilish shrewd. Oh yes, he's quite a card. And to see him break one of them youngsters-well, it's a fair treat."

Mr. Sheppard's grammar was apt to lapse somewhat when his enthusiasm was kindled. Maud shivered a little. Lady Brian smiled indulgently. Poor Giles! He was a rough diamond. She would have to do a little polishing; but she was sure he would become quite a valuable gem when polished.

"Oh, he's Lord Saltash's trainer is he?" she said. "Lord Saltash is a very old friend of ours. Is he-does he ever come down here?"

"Who? Lord Saltash? He has a place here. You couldn't have been very intimate with him if you didn't know that. Just as well p'raps with a man of his tendencies." Sheppard laughed in a fashion that sent the hot blood back to Maud's face. "A bit too fond of his neighbour's wife-that young man. Lucky thing for him that he didn't have to pay heavy damages. More luck than judgment, to my thinking."

"Oh, Giles!" protested Lady Brian. "How you do run on! I did know that he had an estate here. That was why I asked if he still came down. You really mustn't blacken the young man's character in that way. We are all very fond of him."

"Are you though!" Sheppard's laugh died; he looked at Maud with a hint of venom. "Like the rest of your charming sex, eh? Well, we don't see much of the gay Lothario in these parts. If that was your little game, you'd better have stopped in town."

Maud's lips said, "Cad!", but her voice made no sound.

He bowed in ironical acknowledgment and turned to her mother. "Now, my lady, having received these cordial congratulations, I move an adjournment. As you have foretold, we shall doubtless all shake down together very comfortably in the course of a few weeks. But in the meantime I should like to inform all whom it may concern that I am master in my own house, and I expect to be treated as such."

Again his insolent eyes rested upon Maud's proud face, and her slight form quivered in response though she kept her own rigidly downcast.

"Of course that is understood," said Lady Brian, with a pacific hand on his arm. "There! Let us go now! I am sure we are all going to be as happy as the day is long."

She looked up at him with persuasive coquetry, and he at once succumbed. He pulled her to him roughly and bestowed several resounding kisses upon her delicate face, not desisting until with laughing remonstrance she put up a protesting hand.

"Giles, really-really-you mustn't be greedy!" she said, and drew him to the door with some urgency.

He went, his malignancy for the moment swamped by a stronger emotion; and brother and sister were left alone.

"What a disgusting beast!" said Bunny, as the door closed.

Maud said nothing. She only went to the window, and flung it wide.

CHAPTER V IN THE DARK

Black night and a moaning sea! Now and then a drizzle of rain came on a gust of wind, sprinkling the girl's tense face, damping the dark hair that clustered about her temples. But she did not so much as feel it. Her passionate young spirit was all on fire with a fierce revolt against the destinies that ruled her life. She paced the parade as one distraught.

Only for a brief space could she let herself go thus, – only while Bunny and their mother played their nightly game of cribbage. They did not so much as know that she was out of the house. She would have to return ere she was missed, and then would follow the inevitable ordeal of putting Bunny to bed. It was an ordeal that seemed to become each night more difficult. In the morning he was easier to manage; but at night when he was tired out and all his nerves were on edge she sometimes found the task almost beyond her powers. When he was in pain-and this was not infrequently-it took her hours to get him finally settled.

She was sure that it would be no easy task to-night. He had had bouts of severe neuralgia during the day, and his flushed face and irritable manner warned her that there was a struggle in store. She had sometimes sat waiting till the small hours of the morning before he would permit her to move or undress him. She felt that some such trial was before her now, and her heart was as lead.

The house had seemed to stifle her. She had run out for a breath of air; and then something about that moaning shore had seemed to draw her. She had run down to the parade, and now she paced along it, staring down into the fathomless dark below her where the deep water rose and fell with a ceaseless moaning, thumping the well beneath in sullen impotence.

There was no splash of waves, only that dumb striving against a power it could not overthrow. It was like her own mute rebellion, she thought to herself miserably, as persistent and as futile.

She reached the end of the parade. The hour was late; the place deserted. There was a shelter here. She was sure it would be empty, but it did not attract her. She wanted to get as close as possible to that moaning, mysterious waste of water. It held a stark fascination for her. It drew her like a magnet. She stood on the very edge of the parade, facing the drift of rain that blew in from the sea. How dark it was! The nearest lamp was fifty yards away! The thought came to her suddenly, taking form from the formless deep: how easy to take one single false step in that darkness! How swift the consequence, and how complete the deliverance!

A short, inevitable struggle in the dark-in the dark; and then a certain release from this hateful chain called life. It would be terrible, but so quickly over! And this misery that so galled her would be for ever past.

She beat her foot on the edge with a passionate impatience. What a fool she was to suffer so-when there was nothing (never had been any thing) in life worth living for!

Nothing? Well, yes, there was Bunny. She was an absolute necessity to him. That she knew. She was firmly convinced that he would die without her. And though he would be far, far happier dead, poor darling, she couldn't leave him to die alone.

She lifted her clenched hands above her head in straining impotence. For one black moment she almost wished that Bunny were dead.

And then very suddenly, with staggering unexpectedness she received the biggest shock of her life. Two hands closed simultaneously upon her wrists, and she was drawn into two encircling arms.

She uttered a startled outcry, and in the same moment began a wild and flurried struggle for freedom. But the arms that held her closed like steel springs. A man's strength forced her steadily away from the yawning blackness that stretched beyond the parade.

"It's no good kicking," a soft voice said. "You won't get away."

Something in the voice reassured her. She ceased to struggle. "Oh, let me go!" she said breathlessly. "You-you don't understand. I-I-only-"

"Came out for a breath of air?" he suggested. "Of course-I gathered that."

He took his arms away from her, but he still kept one of her wrists in a strong grasp. She could not see his face in the darkness, only his figure, which was short and stoutly built.

"Do you know," he said, "when people take the air like that, I always have to hold on to 'em tight till they've had all they want. It's damn' cheek on my part, as you were just going to remark. But, my girl, it's easier than mucking about in a dark sea looking for 'em after they've lost their balance."

He had led her to the shelter. She sat down rather helplessly, wondering if it would be possible to conceal her identity from him since it was evident that so far he had not recognized her.

He stood in front of her, squarely planted, his hand still locked upon her wrist. She had known him from the first word he had spoken, and, remembering those startling lynx eyes of his, she felt decidedly uneasy. She was sure they could see in the dark.

She spoke after a moment with slight hesitation. "I shouldn't have lost my balance. And if I had meant to jump over, as you imagined, I shouldn't have stood so long thinking about it."

"Sure you're not thinking about it now?" he said.

"Quite sure," she answered.

He bent down, and she was sure-quite sure-that his eyes scrutinized her and took in every detail.

The next moment he released her wrist also. "All right, my girl," he said. "I believe you. But-don't do it again! Accidents happen, you know. You might have had one then; and I should still have had to flounder around looking for you."

Something in his tone made her want to smile, and yet she felt so sure-so sure-that he knew her all the time. And she wanted to resent his familiarity at the same moment. For if he knew her, it was rank presumption to address her so.

She rose at length and faced him with such dignity as she could muster. "I am obliged to you," she said, "but I fail to see why your responsibility should extend so far. If I had fallen over, the chances are that you could never have found me-or saved me if you had."

"Ninety-nine to one!" he said coolly. "But, do you know, I rather count on the hundredth chance. I've taken it-and won on it-before now."

He was not to be disconcerted, it was evident. He was plainly a difficult man to rout, one accustomed to keep his head in any emergency. And she-she was but a slip of a girl in his estimation, and he had her at a disadvantage already.

She felt her face begin to burn in the darkness. She shifted her ground. "I don't see why anyone should be made to live against his will," she said, "why it should be anyone's business to interfere."

"That's because you're young," he said. "You haven't yet got the proper hang of things. It only comes with practice-that."

Her face burned more hotly. He was actually patronizing her!

She turned abruptly. "Good evening," she said, and began to walk away.

But he fell in beside her at once. "I'm going your way," he observed. "May as well see you past the bar of 'The Anchor.' They get a bit lively there sometimes at this end of the day."

He walked with the slight roll of a man accustomed to much riding. She imagined that he never appeared in anything but breeches and gaiters. But his tread was firm and purposeful. Quite obviously it never entered his head that she might not desire his company.

For that reason she had to submit to the arrangement though she felt herself grow more and more rigid as they neared the circle of light cast by the street-lamp. Of course he was bound to recognize her now.

But they reached and passed the lamp, and he tramped straight ahead without looking at her, after the square fashion that she had somehow begun to associate with him.

They reached and passed "The Anchor" also, with its lighted bar and coarse voices and lounging figures. They began the steep ascent up which he had pushed Bunny that afternoon. It was dark enough here at least, and her self-confidence began to revive. She would put him to the test. She would pass the gate that he had seen her enter earlier in the day. If he displayed surprise or hesitation she would know that he had recognized her.

But yet again he baffled her. He tramped steadily on.

She began to get a little breathless. There was another lamp at the top of the road. She did not want to reach that.

In desperation she paused. "Good evening!" she said again.

He stopped at once, and she thought she caught the glitter of his eye, seeking her own in the darkness.

"You're going in now?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

He came a step nearer, and laid one finger on her arm. "Look here, my girl! You take a straight tip from me! If you're in any sort of trouble, go and tell someone! Don't bottle it in till it gets too big for you! And above all, don't go step-dancing on the edge of the parade in the dark! It's a fool thing to do."

He emphasized his points with impressive taps upon her arm. She felt absurdly small and meek.

"Suppose I haven't anyone to tell?" she said, after a moment.

He rose to the occasion instantly. "I'm sound," he said. "Tell me!"

She had not expected that. He seemed to disconcert her at every turn.

"Thank you," she said, taking refuge in extreme frigidity. "I think not."

"As you like," he said. "I daresay I shouldn't in your place. I only suggested it because I can't see a girl in trouble and pass by on the other side."

He spoke quite quietly, but there was a quality in the soft voice that stirred her very strangely, something that made her for the moment forget the man's dominant personality, and feel as if a woman had uttered the words.

She put out a groping hand to him, obeying a curious impulse that would not be denied.

"Thank you," she said again.

He kept her hand for a second or two, holding it squarely, almost as if he were waiting for something.

Then, without a word, he let it go. She turned back; and he went on.

CHAPTER VI

THE UNWILLING GUEST

"But, my dear child, you must appear!" urged the bride, with a piteous little twist of the lips. "I can't go unsupported into that dreadful crowd."

"Oh, Mother!" Maud said. And that was all; for what was the good of saying more? Her mother had made the choice, and there was no turning back. They could only go forward now along the new course, whithersoever it led. "I'll come," she said, after a moment.

Her mother's smile was full of pathos. "We must all make sacrifices for one another, darling," she said. "I have made a very big one for you and Bunny. He-poor little lad-isn't old enough to understand. But surely, you, at least can appreciate it."

She looked so wistful as she spoke that in spite of herself Maud was moved to a very unusual show of tenderness. She turned and kissed her. "I do hope you will be happy," she said. "I expect you will, you know, when you are used to it."

She spoke out of a very definite knowledge of her mother's character. She knew well the yielding adaptability thereof. Giles Sheppard's standards would very soon be hers also, and she would speedily cease to find anything wanting in his friends.

She turned with a sigh. "Let's go and get it over!" she said. "But I can't stay long. I shall have to get back to Bunny."

She and Bunny had spent all the afternoon and evening settling into their new quarters at the Anchor Hotel, and it had been a tiring task. The bride and bridegroom had gone straight from the registry-office where the ceremony had been performed to the county town some thirty miles distant, in the one ramshackle little motor that the hotel possessed, and had returned barely in time to receive the guests whom Sheppard had invited to his wedding-feast.

Neither Maud nor her mother had been told much of the forthcoming festivity, and the girl's dismay upon learning that she was expected to attend it was considerable. She was feeling tired and depressed. Bunny was in a difficult mood, and she knew that another bad night lay before them. Still it was impossible to refuse. She could only yield with as good a grace as she could muster.

"Make yourself pretty, won't you, dear?" said Mrs. Sheppard as, her point gained, she prepared smilingly to depart. "Wear your white silk! You look charming in that."

Maud had not the faintest wish to look charming, but yet again she could not refuse to gratify a wish so amiably expressed. She donned the white silk, therefore, though feeling in any but a festive mood, and prepared herself for the ordeal with a grim determination to escape from it as soon as possible.

She was not tall, but her extreme slenderness gave her a decidedly regal pose. She held her head proudly and bore herself with distinction. Her eyes-those wonderful blue-violet eyes-had the aloof expression of one whose soul is far away.

Giles Sheppard watched her enter the drawing-room behind her mother, and a bitter sneer crossed his bloated face. He was utterly incapable of appreciating that innate pride of race that expressed itself in every line of her. He read only contempt for him and his in the girl's still face, and the deep resentment kindled the night before began to smoulder within him with an ever-increasing heat. How dared she show her airs and graces here? – She, a penniless minx dependent now upon his charity for the very bread she ate!

He turned with an ugly jest at her expense upon his lips to the man with whom he had been talking at her entrance; but the jest was checked unuttered. For the man, square, thickset as a bulldog, abruptly left his side and moved forward.

The quick blood mounted in Maud's face as he intercepted her. She looked at him for a second as if she would turn and flee. But he held out a steady hand to her, and she had to place hers within it.

In a moment his peculiar voice accosted her. "You remember me, Miss Brian? I'm Jake Bolton-the horse breaker. I had the pleasure of doing your brother a small service yesterday."

Both hand and voice reassured her. She had an absurd feeling that he was meting out to her such treatment as he would have considered suitable for a nervous horse. She forced herself to smile upon him; it was the only thing to do.

He smiled in return-his pleasant open smile. "Remember me now?" he said.

"Quite well," she answered.

"Good!" he said briefly. "Let me find you a chair! I don't suppose you know many of the people here."

She did not know any of them, and as Sheppard had seized upon his bride, and was presenting her in rude triumph to each in turn with much noisy laughter and coarse joking it was not difficult to slip into a corner with Jake Bolton without attracting further attention.

He stood beside her for a space while covertly she took stock of him.

Yes, he actually had discarded his gaiters and was wearing evening dress. It did not seem a natural garb for him, but he carried it better than she would have expected. He still reminded her very forcibly of horses, though she could not have definitely said wherein this strong suggestion lay. His ruddy face and short, dominant nose might have belonged to a sailor. But the brilliant chestnut eyes with their red-brown lashes were somehow not of the sea. They made her think of the reek of leather and the thud of galloping hoofs.

Suddenly he turned and caught her critical survey. She dropped her eyes instantly in hot confusion, while he, as if he had just made up his mind, sat down beside her.

"So you and your brother are going to live here?" he said.

She answered him in a low voice; the words seemed to leap from her almost without her conscious volition. "We can't help ourselves."

He gave a short nod as of a suspicion confirmed, and sat in silence for a little. The loud laughter of Giles Sheppard's guests filled in the pause.

Maud held herself rigidly still, repressing a nervous shiver that attacked her repeatedly.

Suddenly the man beside her spoke. "What's the matter with that young brother of yours?"

With relief she came out of her tense silence. "It is an injury to the spine. He had a fall in his babyhood. He suffers terribly sometimes."

"Nothing to be done?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No one very good has seen him. He won't let a doctor come near him now."

"Oh rats!" exclaimed Jake Bolton unexpectedly.

She felt her colour rise as he turned his bright eyes upon her.

"You don't say that a kid like that can get the better of you?" he said.

She resented the question; yet she answered it. "Bunny has a strong will. I never oppose it."

"And why not?" He was looking directly at her with a comical smile as if he were inspecting some quaint object of interest.

Again against her will she made reply. "I try to give him all he wants. He has missed all that is good in life."

He wrinkled his forehead for a moment as if puzzled, then broke into a laugh. "Say, what a queer notion to get!" he said.

She stiffened on the instant, but he did not seem to notice it. He leaned towards her, and laid one finger-a short, square fore-finger-on her arm.

"Tell me now-what are the good things in life?"

She withdrew her arm from his touch, and regarded him with a hauteur that did not wholly veil her embarrassment.

"You don't know!" said Jake. "Be honest and say so!"

But Maud only retired further into her shell. "I think we have wandered rather far from the subject," she said coldly. "My brother is unfortunately the victim of circumstance, and no discussion can alter that fact."

He accepted the snub without a sign of discomfiture. "Is he here now?" he asked.

She bent her head. "In this house-yes."

"Will you let me see him presently?" he pursued.

Distantly she made reply. "I am afraid that is impossible."

"Why?" he said.

She raised her dark brows.

"Tell me why!" he insisted.

Calmly she met his look. "It is not good for him to see strangers at night. It upsets his rest."

"You think it would be bad for him to see me?" he questioned.

His voice was suddenly very deliberate. He was looking her full in the face.

A curious little tremor went through her. She felt as if he had pinioned her there before him.

Her reply astounded herself. "I don't say it would be bad for him, – only-inadvisable. He is rather excited already."

"Will you ask him presently if he would come to see me?" said Jake Bolton steadily.

She bit her lip, hesitating.

"I shan't upset him," he said. "I won't excite him. I'll quiet him down."

She did not want to yield-yet she yielded. "I will ask him-if you wish," she said.

He smiled. "Thank you, Miss Brian. You didn't want to give in, did you? But I undertake that you will not be sorry."

"Hullo, Jacob!" blared Sheppard's voice suddenly across the room. "What are you doing over there, you rascal? Thought I shouldn't see you, eh? Ah, you're a deep one, you are! I daresay now you've made up your mind that that young woman is a princess in disguise. She isn't. She's just my step-daughter, and a very cheap article, I assure you, Jake, – very cheap indeed!"

The roar of laughter that greeted this sally filled the room, drowning any further remarks. Sheppard stood in the centre, swaying a little, looking round on the assembled company with a facetious grin.

Jake Bolton rose and went to him. He stood with him for a moment, and Maud, shivering in her corner, marvelled that he did not look mean and insignificant beside the other's great bulk. She wondered what he said. It was only a few words, and they were not apparently uttered with much urgency. But Sheppard's grin died away, and she fancied that for a moment-only for a moment-he looked a little sheepish. Then he clapped a great hand upon Bolton's shoulder.

"All right. All right. It's for you to make the running. Come along, ladies and gentlemen! Let us feed!"

There was a general move, and a tall, lanky young man with a white face and black hair that shone like varnish slouched up to Maud.

"I don't see why Bolton should have all the plums," he said. "May I have the honour of conducting you to the supper table?"

She was on her feet. She looked at him with a disdain so withering that the young man wilted visibly before her.

"No offence meant, I'm sure," he said, shuffling his feet. "But I thought-as you were being so pally with Jake Bolton-you wouldn't object to being pally with me."

Maud said nothing. She was in fact so quivering with rage that speech would have been difficult.

A very stout elderly lady, with a neck and arms that were hardly distinguishable from the red silk dress she wore, sailed up to them. "Come, come, Miss!" she said, beaming good-temperedly upon Maud's pale face. "We're not standing on ceremony to-night. We're all friends here. You won't mind going in with my boy Tom, I'm sure. He's considered quite the ladies' man, I can assure you."

"Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Wright? Miss Brian is going in with me," said Jake Bolton's smooth voice behind her. "Tom, you git!"

Somehow-before she knew it-the black-haired young man was gone from her path, and her hand lay trembling within Bolton's arm.

She did not utter a word, she could not. She felt choked.

Jake Bolton said nothing either. He only piloted her through the crowd with the smile of the winner curving the corners of his mouth.

They readied the dining-room, and people began to seat themselves around a long centre table. There was no formal arrangement, and some confusion ensued in consequence.

"Fight it out among yourselves!" yelled Sheppard above the din of laughter and movement. "Make yourselves at home!"

Bolton glanced round. "There's a table for two in that alcove," he said. "Shall we make for that?"

"Anywhere!" she said desperately.

He elbowed a way for her. The table was near a window, the alcove draped with curtains. He put her into a chair where she was screened from the eyes of those at the centre table. He seated himself opposite to her.

"Don't look so scared!" he said.

She smiled at him faintly in silence.

"I gather you don't enjoy this sort of bear-fight," he said.

She remained silent. The man disconcerted her. She was burningly conscious that she had not been too discreet in taking him even so far into her confidence.

He leaned slowly forward, fixing her with those relentless, lynx-like eyes. "Miss Brian," he said, his voice very level, faultlessly distinct. "I'm rough, no doubt, but please believe I'm white!"

She looked at him, startled, unhappy, not knowing what to say.

He nodded, still watching her. "Don't you forget it!" he said. "There are plenty of beasts in the world, but I'm not one of 'em. You'll drink champagne, of course."

He got up to procure it, and Maud managed in the interval to recover some of her composure. When he came back, she mustered a smile and thanked him.

"You look fagged out," he said, as he filled her glass. "What have you been doing?"

"Getting straight in our new quarters here," she answered. "It takes some time."

"Where are your rooms?" he asked.

She hesitated momentarily. "It is really only one room," she said. "But it is a fine one. I have another little one upstairs; but it is a long way off. Of course I shall sleep downstairs with Bunny."

"Do you always sleep with him?" he asked.

She coloured a little. "Yes."

"Is he a good sleeper?" He had moved round and was filling his own glass.

She watched his steady hand with a touch of envy. She would have given much for as cool a nerve just then.

"Is he a good sleeper?" He repeated the question as he set down the bottle.

She answered it at once. "No; a very poor one."

"And you look after him night and day?" Bolton's eyes suddenly comprehended her. "I guess that accounts for it," he said, in a tone of enlightenment.

"For what?" She met his look haughtily, determined to hold her own.

But he smiled and refused the contest. "For much," he said. "Now, what will you eat? Lobster? That's right. I want to see you started. What a filthy racket they are making! I hope it won't upset your appetite any."

She had never felt less hungry in her life, but out of a queer sensation of gratitude she tried to eat what he put before her. He had certainly done his best to shield her from that objectionable crowd, but she was still by no means certain that she liked the man. He was too much inclined to

take her friendship for granted, too ready to presume upon a very short acquaintance. And she was sure-quite sure now-that he had recognized her from the very first moment, down on the parade the night before. The knowledge was very disquieting. He was kind-oh, yes, he was kind. But she felt that he knew too much.

And so a certain antagonism warred against her gratitude, and prevented any gracious expression thereof. She only longed-oh, how desperately! – to flee away from this new and horrible world into which she had been so ruthlessly dragged and to see no more of its inhabitants for ever.

Vain longing! Even then she knew, or shrewdly suspected, that her lot was to be cast in that same world for the rest of her mortal life.

CHAPTER VII THE MAGICIAN

"Oh, Maud! I thought you were never coming!"

Bunny's face, pale and drawn, wearing the irritable frown so habitual to it, turned towards the opening door.

"I have brought you a visitor," his sister said.

Her voice was low and nervous. She looked by no means sure of Bunny's reception of the news. Behind her came Jake Bolton the trainer, alert and self-assured. It was quite evident that he had no doubts whatever upon the subject. His thick mat of chestnut hair shone like copper in the brilliant electric light, such hair as would have been a woman's glory, but that Jake kept very closely cropped.

"What on earth for?" began Bunny querulously; and then magically his face changed, and he smiled. "Hullo! You?" he said.

Bolton came to his side and took the small, eager hand thrust out to him. "Yes, it's me," he said. "No objection, I hope?"

"I should think not!" The boy's face was glowing with pleasure. "Sit down!" he said. "Maud, get a chair!"

Bolton turned sharply, found her already bringing one and took it swiftly from her.

He sat down by Bunny's side, and took the little thin hand back into his. "Do you know, I've been thinking a lot about you," he said.

Bunny was vastly flattered. He liked the grasp of the strong fingers also, though he would not probably have tolerated such a thing from any but this stranger.

"Yes," pursued Jake, in his soft, level voice. "I reckon I've taken a fancy to you, little chap-I beg your pardon-Sir Bernard. How have you been to-day?"

"Don't call me that!" said Bunny, turning suddenly red.

"What?" Jake smiled upon him, his magic, kindly smile. "Am I to call you Bunny-like your sister-then?"

"Yes. And you can call her Maud," said Bunny autocratically. "Can't he, Maud?"

Jake turned his head and looked at her. She was standing before the fire, the red glow all about her, very slim, very graceful, very stately. She did not so much as glance at Jake, only bent a little towards the blaze so that he could not see her face.

"I don't think I dare," said Jake.

"Maud!" Peremptorily Bunny's voice accosted her. "Come over here! Come and sit on my bed!"

It was more of a command than an invitation. Maud straightened herself and turned.

But as she did so, their visitor intervened. "No, don't!" he said. "Sit down right there, Miss Brian, in that easy-chair, and have a rest!"

His voice was peremptory too, but in a different way. Bunny stared at him wide-eyed.

Jake met the stare with an admonitory shake of the head. "Guess Bunny's not wanting you," he said. "Don't listen to anything he says!"

Bunny's mouth opened to protest, remained open for about five seconds, and finally he said, "All right, Maud. You can stay by the fire while we talk."

And Maud, much to her own surprise, sat down in the low chair on the hearth and leaned her aching head back upon the cushion.

She had her back to Bunny and his companion, and the soft murmur of the latter's voice held nought disturbing. It seemed in fact to possess something of a soothing quality, for very soon her heavy eyelids began to droop and the voice to recede into ever growing distance. For a space she still heard it, dim and remote as the splash of the waves on the shore; then very softly it was blotted out. Her cares and her troubles all fell away from her. She sank into soundless billows of sleep.

It was a perfectly dreamless repose, serene as a child's and it seemed to last indefinitely. She lay in complete content, unconscious of all the world, lapped in peace and blissfully free from the goading anxiety that usually disturbed her rest. It was the calmest slumber she had known for many years.

From it she awoke at length with a guilty start. The fall of a piece of coal had broken the happy spell. She sat up, to find herself in firelight only.

Her first thought was for Bunny, and she turned in her chair and looked across the unfamiliar room. He was lying very still in the shadows. Softly she rose and stepped across to him.

Yes, he was asleep also, lying among his pillows. The chair by his side was empty, the visitor vanished.

Very cautiously she bent over him. He had been lying dressed outside the bed. Now-with a thrill of amazement she realized it-he was undressed and lying between the sheets. He was breathing very quietly, and his attitude was one of easy rest. Surely some magic had been at work!

On a chest of drawers near stood a glass that had contained milk. He always had some hot milk last thing, but she had not procured it for him. She had in fact been wondering how she would obtain it to-night.

Another coal fell, and she crept back to replace it. Stooping she caught sight of another glass in the fender, full of milk. It must have been there a long time, for it was barely warm. Clearly it had been intended for her. She put it to her lips and drank.

Who could have put it there? Her mother? No; she was sure that her mother would have roused her from her sleep if she had entered. She was moreover quite incapable of getting Bunny to bed now that he had grown out of childhood.

The house was very quiet. She wondered if the guests had all gone. The room was situated at the end of a long passage, so that the noise of the party had scarcely reached it. But the utter silence without as well as within made her think that it was very late.

She dared not switch on the light, but as the fire burned up again she held her watch to the blaze. Half-past two!

In utter amazement she began to undress.

There was no second bed in the room; only a horse-hair sofa that was far less comfortable than the chair by the fire. She lay down upon it, however, pulling over her an ancient fur travelling-rug belonging to her mother, and here she lay dozing and waking, turning over the mystery in her mind, while another quiet hour slipped away.

Then there came a movement from Bunny, and she sat up.

"Are you awake, Maud?" asked his voice out of the shadows. "Has Jake gone?"

"Yes, darling," she made answer. "Are you wanting anything?"

She was by his side with the words; she bent over him. He wanted his pillows rearranged, and when she had done it he said, "I say, when did you wake up?"

"About an hour ago," she said.

He chuckled a little. "Weren't you surprised to find me in bed?"

"Yes, I was," she said. "How did you get there?"

Bunny seemed to regard the matter as a joke. "That fellow Jake-he went over and looked at you, came back and said you were fast asleep, asked what I generally had done, and if he couldn't do it for me. He managed very well and was jolly quick about it too. I thought you would be sure to wake, but you didn't. And when I was settled, he asked if I didn't want anything, and I said, 'Yes, hot milk', and he crept off and got it. He brought a glass for you too. He stuck it in the fender. Have you had it?"

"Yes," Maud said. "But Bunny, didn't he hurt you at all? You nearly always cry out when you're lifted."

"I didn't that time," said Bunny proudly. "I told him I should probably squeal, and he said if I so much as squeaked he'd throttle me. He's a brick, do you know, Maud. And he seemed to know how to get hold of me without being told."

Maud's amazement was growing. The man must be a genius indeed to manage Bunny in that fashion.

"After that," said Bunny, "he sat down by me and got hold of my hand and said, 'Now I'm going to send you to sleep.' I told him I never slept the first part of the night, and he grinned and said, 'You'll be asleep in five minutes from now if you let yourself go.' And I said, 'Rats!' And he said, 'Shut up!' So I did. And he held my hand tight and sat staring across the room like a mute till somehow he got all blurred up and then I suppose I went to sleep. I never knew when he went. Did you?"

"No," said Maud. She had an uncanny feeling that Jake had somehow left his influence behind him in the atmosphere. His personality seemed to dominate it still. She was sure he had meant to be kind, but a queer sense of antagonism made her resent his kindness. She did not like Bunny's whole-hearted admiration.

"He's a brick," the boy said again, "and do you know he's done almost everything under the sun? He's been a sailor, and he's dug for gold, and he's kept a Californian store, and he's been a cowboy on a ranch. He says the last suited him best because he's so keen on the wilds and horses. It was out in the wilds somewhere that Lord Saltash came on him and brought him home to be his trainer. But he's British-born all the same. I knew he was that the first time I saw him."

He was evidently a paragon of all the virtues in Bunny's estimation, and Maud did not attempt to express her own feelings, which were, in fact, somewhat complex.

Very deep down in her woman's soul a warning voice had begun to make itself heard, but she could not tell Bunny that. Scarcely even to herself dared she admit that the straight, free gaze of those red-brown eyes possessed the power to set her heart a-fluttering in wild rebellion like the wings of a captive bird.

CHAPTER VIII

THE OFFER

In many respects the change from their lodgings up the hill to the Anchor Hotel by the fishing-quay was for the better, and as the days went on and winter drew near Maud realized this. Bunny's room had a southern aspect, and it was only on dull days that they needed a fire before evening. It possessed a French window also, which was an immense advantage; for it was perfectly easy to wheel him out on to the stone verandah outside it, and here he would lie in his own sheltered corner for hours; watching the sea and the shore and the passers-by, and sometimes talking to the very infrequent visitors who came at that season to "The Anchor."

He and Maud lived their lives apart from the rest of the establishment, an arrangement which Mrs. Sheppard deplored although she knew it to be an eminently wise one. Her husband, who never lost an opportunity to revile the girl who always treated him with the same aloof distance of manner, bitterly resented the circumstance that so limited his chances of what he styled "taking her down a peg." He hated her with the rancorous and cruel hatred of conscious inferiority, savagely repenting his undertaking to provide for her. They did not often clash because Maud steadfastly avoided him. And this also he resented, for he was in effect simply biding his time to drive her away. She was a perpetual thorn in his side, and he seized every chance that presented itself of inflicting some minor humiliation upon her. His antipathy had become almost an obsession, and he never saw her without flinging some gibing taunt in her direction.

And those taunts of his rankled deep. Maud's feelings towards him were of a very deadly order. If she had not avoided him, she knew that she could not have remained. But for Bunny's sake she endured his insults when contact with him became inevitable. She could not be separated from Bunny, and she knew of no other haven.

Towards Bunny, Sheppard displayed no ill feeling. He had small cause to do so, for the boy was kept rigorously out of his way, and his mother was more than willing to leave the entire care of him to Maud. In fact there were sometimes whole days on which she scarcely saw him. The change that Maud had foretold on her wedding-day had already begun in her. She had quitted her own world without a pang, and was sunning herself in the warmth of her husband's rough devotion. As she herself expressed it, she was getting really fond of Giles, whose brutish affection for her was patent to all.

Maud suppressed a shudder whenever she encountered any evidence of it, and as a result he was always noisier and coarser in his demonstrations before her face of white disgust. What wonder that she rigidly avoided him and insisted upon taking all her meals with Bunny?

In this way she avoided his loud-voiced friends also, – another frequent cause for offence! – all, that is, save one. That one was Jake Bolton; and, since Bunny had so decreed it, this man came and went exactly as he chose.

She never raised the smallest objection to his presence, but she certainly never welcomed him. In fact she generally took advantage of his coming to leave Bunny for a space and it even became a recognized thing between them that she should avail herself of the leisure thus provided to run down to the shore for the brief recreation which was never obtainable in any other way.

Very often she would not return until after Jake's departure, and so on the whole, though they met so frequently, she actually saw but little of him. He was Bunny's pal, and-obedient to the inner warning-she was firmly determined that he should never become hers.

He did not seem inclined to combat this determination, but on the other hand he never relinquished by a hair's breadth the position he had taken up at the beginning of their acquaintance. It was impossible to snub him. He never heard a snub. He never advanced, and he never retreated. He simply stood firm, so that after a time her uneasiness began to die down almost in spite of her, and she even came to look upon him in a very guarded way as a friend in need. He could do anything in

the world with Bunny, and though she was half-suspicious of his influence she could not deny that he invariably exercised it in the right direction. He had even begun to implant in Bunny a wholly novel and sometimes almost disconcerting consideration for herself. Bunny was more tractable just then than he had ever been before. It was the only bright spot in her sky.

It was on an afternoon in late November that she went down to the shore during one of Jake Bolton's visits to her brother, and watched the fishing-fleet come in through a blur of rain. The beach looked dank and sodden and there were trails of mist in the air. Dusk was just beginning to fall, and it would be a wet night. But the air blew in off the water sweet and southerly, and it did her good to breath it.

She walked the length of the parade twice, and finally, as the fishing-smacks dropped one by one into the harbour on the further side of the quay, turned homewards, feeling invigorated and considerably the happier for the brief exercise.

She wondered if Jake meant to stay to tea. He did not often do so, only, on the very rare occasions when she added her invitation to Bunny's. She supposed she would have to ask him to-day if she found him still there when she returned. But she hoped she would not. She liked him best when he was not there.

Regretfully she turned her back upon the heaving waters, and crossed the road to the Anchor Hotel. It was growing rapidly dusk.

She reached the entrance, and was stretching out a hand towards the swing-doors when one of them opened abruptly from within and Jake stepped out. He was smoking a cigarette, and he did not in the first moment perceive her. She drew back in an instinctive effort to escape notice.

But he stopped short almost immediately and accosted her.

"Ah! Is that you? I was just wondering where you were."

Her thoughts flew to Bunny. "Am I wanted?" she asked quickly.

He checked her with a gesture. "No, the lad's all right. It's I who want you. Can you spare me a minute?"

It was impossible to refuse, but she did not yield graciously. Somehow she never could be gracious to Jake Bolton.

"I ought to go in," she said. "It is getting late."

"I shan't keep you long," he said, and she noticed that it was plainly a foregone conclusion with him that she would grant him what he asked.

She turned back into the misty darkness with a short sigh of impatience.

"Walk to the end of the parade with me!" he said, and fell in beside her.

Later she wondered why she did not lodge a more energetic protest, for it was beginning to rain in earnest; but at the time it seemed inevitable that she should do as he desired.

She re-crossed the road with him, and turned to walk to the nearest end of the parade. They approached the spot where he had once laid peremptory hands upon her and drawn her out of danger. It was as they neared it that he suddenly spoke.

"I am sorry to have brought you out again into the wet. Will you come into the shelter?"

She acquiesced. The shelter was empty. She stepped within it and stood waiting.

He took out his cigarette and after a moment dropped it and set his heel upon it.

"I want to speak to you about your brother," he said. "And, by the way, before I forget it, I've promised to trundle him up to the Stables next Sunday to show him the animals. You will come too, won't you? I can give you tea at my house. It's close by."

Maud's eyes opened a little. The suggestion somewhat startled her, and she resented being startled. "You are very kind," she said coldly. "But I don't think we can either of us do that."

"I am not in the least kind," said Jake. "And will you tell me why you are offended with me for suggesting it?"

"I am not-offended," she said, feeling herself grow uncomfortably hot over the assertion. "But-I think you might have proposed this to me before mentioning it to Bunny."

"But what's the matter with the proposal?" he said. "The boy was delighted with it."

"That may be," Maud said; and then she paused, feeling suddenly that she was being absurdly unreasonable. She blushed still more hotly in the gloom, and became silent.

Jake stretched out one steady finger and laid it on her arm. "Don't take fright at nothing!" he said, in an admonitory tone. "If you're going to shy at this, I reckon you'll kick up your heels, and bolt at my next suggestion."

She drew herself away from his touch, standing very erect. "Perhaps you would be wiser not to make it," she said.

"Very likely," agreed Jake. "But-as you object to my mentioning things to your brother first-I don't see how you can refuse to listen."

This was unanswerable. She bit her lip. "I am listening," she said.

"And the answer is 'No,' whatever it is," rejoined Jake, with a whimsical note in his soft voice. "Say, Miss Brian, play fair!"

She felt somewhat softened in spite of herself. "I have said I will listen," she said.

"With an unbiassed mind?" he said.

"Of course." She spoke impatiently; she wanted to get the interview over, and she more and more resented his attitude towards her. There was something of the superior male about him that grated on her nerves.

"All right," said Jake. "I'll go ahead. If you will condescend to come up to my place on Sunday, I will show you a man-one of our jockeys-who was injured in just the same way that your brother is injured, and who is now as sound as I am. He was operated upon by an American doctor called Capper-one of the biggest surgeons in the world. It was a bit of an experiment, but it succeeded. Now what has been done once can be done again. I chance to know Capper, and he is coming to London next spring. He makes a speciality of spinal trouble. Won't you let him try his hand on Bunny? There would be a certain amount of risk of course. But wouldn't it be worth it? Say, wouldn't it be worth it, to see that boy on his legs, living his life as it was meant to be lived instead of dragging out a wretched existence that hardly deserves to be called life at all?"

He stopped abruptly, as if realizing that he had suffered his eagerness to carry him away. But to Maud who had begun to listen in icy aloofness that same eagerness was as the kindling of a fire in a place of utter desolation.

For the moment she forgot to be cold. "Oh, if it were only possible!" she said. "If it only could be!"

"Why can't it be?" said Jake.

She came back with something of a shock to the consciousness of his personality. She drew back from the warmth that he had made her feel.

"Because," she said frigidly, "doctors-great surgeons-don't perform big operations for nothing."

"I don't think Capper would charge an out-of-the-way amount if he did it for me," said Jake.

"Perhaps not." Maud spoke in the dead tone of finality.

He leaned slightly towards her. "Say, Miss Brian, aren't you rather easily disheartened? Wouldn't your people scrape together something for such a purpose?"

"No," she said.

"Are you quite sure?" he urged. "Won't you even ask 'em?"

She turned from him. "It's no good asking," she said, her voice low and reluctant. "The only relation we possess who might help won't even answer when I write to him."

"Why don't you go and see him?" said Jake. "Put the thing before him! He couldn't refuse."

She shook her head. "It wouldn't be any good," she said, with dreary conviction. "Besides, I couldn't get to Liverpool and back in a day, and I couldn't leave Bunny for longer. And-in any case-I know-I know it wouldn't be any good," she ended, with half-angry vehemence.

"I wish the little chap were my brother," said Jake.

Maud was silent. Somehow her vehemence had upset her; she had an outrageous desire to cry.

Jake was silent too for a few seconds; then abruptly he squared his shoulders and spoke with aggressive decision. "Miss Brian, a good friend is nearer than a dozen beastly relations. With your permission-I'll see this thing through."

"Oh no, no!" she said quickly. "No, no!"

"For the boy's sake!" he said.

"No!" she said again.

There fell a sudden silence. Then, in an odd voice Jake said, "Bunny told me-only to-day-with pride-that there was nothing in the world that you wouldn't do for him."

She made a sharp movement of protest. "I can't take-what I could never repay," she said, speaking almost below her breath. "Neither shall Bunny."

"There are more ways than one of paying a debt," said Jake.

He looked almost formidable standing there in the twilight with his legs well apart and unabashed resolution in every line of his sturdy figure.

She faced him with a sinking sense of her own inferior strength. His self-assertion seemed to weigh her down. She felt puny and insignificant before it. As usual she sought refuge in stately aloofness. She had no other weapon, and at least it covered the beating of her heart.

"I am afraid I don't understand you," she said.

"Shall I explain?" said Jake; and then, as she was silent: "Can't you see I'm making a bid for your friendship?"

She froze at the effrontery of the words.

"Oh yes," said Jake. "I quite understand. I'm only tolerated for Bunny's sake. Isn't that so? You're too proud to associate with a clod like me. But for all that-though you'll never look at me-I'm not afraid to let you know that I've taken a fancy to you. You've never contemplated such a fool idea as marriage with me, I know: but you go home and contemplate it right now! Ask yourself if you wouldn't find a husband like me less nauseating than a step-father like Giles Sheppard! Ask yourself if the little chap wouldn't stand a better chance all round if you brought him along to me! I reckon we'd make his life easier between us even if Capper couldn't make him walk. He's too heavy a burden for you to carry alone, my girl. You weren't created for such a burden as that. Let me lend a hand! I give you my solemn oath I'll be good to you both!"

A tremor of passion ran through his last words, and his voice took a deeper note. Maud, upright and quivering, felt the force of the man like the blast of a tearing gale carrying all before it. She would have left him at the commencement of his speech, but he blocked the way. She stood imprisoned in a corner of the shelter, steadying herself against the woodwork, while the full strength of his individuality surged around her. She felt physically exhausted, as though she had been trying to stand against a tremendous wind.

Several seconds throbbed away ere she could trust herself to speak without faltering. Then: "Please let me pass!" she said.

He stood back instantly and she was conscious of a lessening of that mysterious influence which had so overwhelmed her.

"Are you angry-or what?" he said.

She gathered her strength, and stepped forth, though she was trembling from head to foot.

"Yes, I am angry," she said, forcing her voice to a certain measure of calmness notwithstanding. "I have never been so insulted in my life!"

"Insulted!" He echoed the word in unfeigned astonishment; then, as she would have left him, put a detaining hand upon her arm. "Say, Miss Brian! Since when has a proposal of marriage constituted an insult in your estimation?"

He spoke with something of a drawl, but it compelled attention. She stopped, resisting the desire to shake herself free from his touch.

"A proposal of marriage from you could be nothing else," she said very bitterly. "You take advantage of my position, but you know full well that we are not equals."

"Oh yes, I know that," he said. "But-is any man your equal?"

"I meant socially of course," she said, beginning to recover her composure and her dignity.

"I see." Jake's voice was very level. "And that is why you are upset-angry?"

"It is a very sufficient reason," she said.

"Yes, but is it-as things now are? There is another point of view to that problem. If you had been leading a happy, sheltered life in your own sphere-that might have been a reason for me to hold off. You might with justice have scorned my offer. But-as things are-as things are-" he spoke with strong insistence. "Is it taking advantage of your position to want to deliver you from it? It's a beastly position-it's a humiliating position. And I gather you've no prospect of deliverance. Well, I offer you a way of escape. It mayn't be the way you would choose, but-there are worse, many worse. I'm not a bad sort, and I've got a soft spot in my heart for that little brother of yours. Say, Miss Brian, do you despise me so badly that you can't even give the idea your impartial consideration?"

He spoke whimsically, but there was a rough dignity about him nevertheless which had an undeniable effect upon her. She could no longer spurn him with contempt, though neither could she yield a single inch to his persuasion.

"It would be quite useless for me to consider it," she said. "I am sorry if I was rude to you just now, but your suggestion rather took my breath away. Please understand that it is quite, quite impossible!"

"All right," he said. "Still you won't dismiss it quite entirely from your mind? That is to say, you'll hold it in reserve just in case a way of escape becomes essential to you. I shan't break my heart about it, but neither shall I change my mind. The offer remains open day and night just in case the emergency might arise which would make you willing to avail yourself of it."

He took his hand from her arm, and she felt that the interview was over.

Yet he walked beside her as she began to move away, and crossed the road again with her to the entrance of the hotel.

"And one thing more," he said, as they reached it. "I have no wish or intention to force myself upon you, so if-to please Bunny-you can bring yourself to accompany the pair of us on the Sunday expedition to see the stud, you need not be afraid that I shall attempt to take advantage of your position again."

The colour flamed up in her face at the few, leisurely words. He seemed to possess the power of calling it up at will.

She stood on the first step, looking down at him, uncertain whether to be haughty or kind.

He moved close to her, and by the lamplight that streamed through the glass doors she saw his frank, disarming smile.

"And look here!" he said. "Don't fling cold water on that other scheme for Bunny that I broached to you, yet! You never know what may turn up."

The smile decided her. She held out her hand to him. "But, you know, I couldn't-I really couldn't-" she said rather incoherently.

He gave the hand a firm grip and released it. "No. All right. I understand. But think about it! And don't run away with the idea that I planned it just for your sake! I'd like jolly well to be of use to you. But-in the main-it's the lad I'm thinking of. You do the same! After all, it's second nature with you to put him first, isn't it?"

"He always will come first, with me," she said. "But I couldn't-I can't-incur such an obligation-even for him."

"All right," said Jake, unmoved. "Class it with the impossibles-but, all the same, think about it!" He was gone with the words, striding away down the street without a backward glance.

Maud was left alone with the warm blood still in her cheeks and an odd feeling of uncertainty at her heart. She felt baffled and uneasy like a swimmer in deep waters, aware of a strong current but still not wholly at its mercy, nor wholly aware of its force and direction. She did not mean to let herself be drawn into that current. She hung on the edge of it, trying to strike out and avoid it. But all the time it drew her, it drew her. And-though she would not admit it even to herself-she knew it and was afraid.

CHAPTER IX

THE REAL MAN

That Sunday of their visit to the Burchester Stables was a marked day with Maud for the rest of her life.

The Stables were situated on the side of a splendid down about a mile from the sea. Lord Saltash's estate stretched for miles around, and he practically owned the whole of Fairharbour. Burchester Castle was the name of the seat, an ancient pile dating from Saxon times that had belonged to the Burchester family since the days of the Tudors. Charlie Burchester had inherited it from his uncle five years before; but he did not live in it. He had occasional wild house-parties there, especially for the event of the Graydown Races. And he sometimes spent a night or two when the mood took him to visit the stud. But for the most part the house stood in empty grandeur, its rooms shuttered and shrouded, its stately gardens deserted save for the gardeners who tended them.

Exquisite gardens they were. Maud had a glimpse of them from the height of the down-terraced gardens with marble steps and glistening fountains, yew-walks, darkly mysterious, quaintly fashioned, pines that rustled and whispered together. The house was securely hidden from view among its trees.

"It used to be a nunnery," said Jake. "Its inhabitants had a chaste objection to publicity. It's an interesting old place, about a mile from the Stables. I'd like to show it to you some time. You'd enjoy it."

"Not to-day," said Bunny quickly.

Jake smiled at his tone. "No, not to-day, lad. We'll go and see the animals to-day."

He had brought them up the long, winding private road which, though smooth enough, was a continual ascent. Maud had wanted to help with the invalid-chair, but he had steadily refused any assistance. She marvelled at the evident ease with which he had accomplished the journey, never hurrying, never halting, not even needing to pause for breath, untiring as a wild animal in its native haunts. She remembered the nickname he bore on the Turf, and reflected that it fitted him in more than one respect. He was so supple, so tough, so sure.

Suddenly those bright eyes flashed round on her. "Say, you're tired," he said, in his queer, lilting voice. "We'll have tea first."

"No!" cried Bunny on the instant. "We'll do the Stables first, Jake. It's not time for tea. Besides, tea can wait."

Jake's brown hand came over the back of the chair and filliped the boy's cheek. "Shut up, my son!" said Jake.

Maud stared at the action. Bunny turned scarlet.

Jake unconcernedly continued his easy progress. "Reckon the animals won't die if we don't inspect 'em till after tea," he said. "What's your idea, Miss Brian?"

"If Bunny wishes to go straight to the Stables-" she began.

He interrupted. "Bunny has changed his mind. Ain't that so, Bunny?"

"I don't care," said Bunny rather sullenly.

"All right then," said Jake. "Tea first!"

He wheeled the chair into a great gateway that led into a wide stone courtyard. White-washed stables were on each side of them and at regular intervals large green tubs containing miniature fir-trees. At the further end of the courtyard stood a square, white-washed house.

"That's my shanty," said Jake.

It was a very plain building; in former days it had been a farm. There was a white railing in front and a small white gate flanked by another pair of toy firs. The whole effect was one of prim cleanliness.

"There's a bit of garden at the back," said Jake. "And a summer-house-quite a decent little summer-house-that looks right away to the sea. Now, Bunny lad, there's a comfortable sofa inside for you. Think I can carry you in?"

"Can't you take in the chair?" Maud asked nervously.

Jake looked at her. "Oh yes, I can. But the passage is a bit narrow. It's not very easy to turn."

"Of course he can carry me, Maud. Let him carry me!" broke in Bunny, in an aggrieved tone. "You make such a stupid fuss always."

Jake had thrown open the door of his home. "You go in, Miss Brian!" he said. "Turn to the right at the end of the passage, and it's the door facing you."

She went in reluctantly. The passage was small and dark, oak-panelled, low-ceiled.

"Go right in!" said Jake.

She did not want to turn her back on Bunny, but she knew that the boy would resent any lingering on her part. She passed down the passage and turned as Jake had directed.

The door that faced her stood open, and she entered a long, low room, oak-panelled like the passage, with a deep, old-fashioned fireplace in which burned a cheery wood fire. Two windows, diamond-paned, and a door with the upper panels of glass occupied the whole of the further side of the room, and the western sunshine slanting in threw great bars of gold across the low window-seats.

Tea had been set on a table in the middle of the room, to the corner of which a sofa had been drawn. There were bed-pillows as well as cushions on the sofa. Evidently Jake had ransacked the house to provide comfort for Bunny.

Maud stood just within the doorway listening, dreading to hear the indignant outcry that generally attended any movement of the poor little crippled body. But she heard nothing beyond Jake's voice murmuring unintelligibly, and in a few seconds the steady tread of his feet as he entered the house.

Then, while she stood listening, the feet drew near and there came a pleased chuckle from Bunny. Jake came squarely in, carrying him like an infant, and deposited him with infinite care among the cushions that Maud hastily adjusted for his reception.

"There you are, my son," he said. "Make yourself as much at home as you can!"

Bunny looked about him with keen interest. "Oh, I say, what a jolly room! What a ripping room! You're beastly lucky to live here, Jake."

"Oh, yes, it's a decent little crib," said Jake. "Those doorsteps were just made for an evening pipe."

He indicated the closed glass-panelled door. Maud went to it and found that the ground sloped sharply away from this side of the house, necessitating a flight of several steps. They led down into a sunny space that was more orchard than garden, – fruit-trees and grass spreading down the side of the hill towards the magic, pine-screened grounds of Burchester Castle.

Jake came and stood beside her for a moment. He was being studiously impersonal that day, an attitude which curiously caused her more of uneasiness than relief.

"The arbour is at the end by those apple-trees," he said. "You can just see the roof from here. It looks over the field where we train. It's sport to watch the youngsters learning to run. Lord Saltash calls it the grand stand."

"Do you know Lord Saltash?" broke in Bunny. "He used to be a great pal of ours once."

"Oh, that was years ago-in London," said Maud quickly. "No doubt he has quite forgotten our existence by this time."

She spoke with unwitting sharpness, hotly aware that the lynx-like eyes of her host were upon her.

Bunny took instant offence. "I'm sure it wasn't years ago, Maud; and you know it wasn't. It isn't more than two since we saw him last-if that. As for forgetting all about us, that isn't very likely, considering the mother was one of his bad debts."

"Bunny!" Maud began in rare anger.

But in the same moment Jake swung calmly round. "Say, Bunny, do you like shrimps?" he asked. He moved to Bunny's side and stood looking down at him. "I got some in case. Miss Brian, I hope shrimps are good for him, are they?"

"She doesn't know," said Bunny irritably. "What's the good of asking her? Of course I like shrimps! Aren't we going to begin soon? I want to go and see the horses."

"You seem to be in an all-fired hurry," observed Jake. "Left your manners behind, haven't you?" He took out his watch. "Half-past three! All right, my son. We'll go at four, Miss Brian, do you mind pouring out?"

He set a chair for her facing the window, and sat down himself next to Bunny.

It seemed to Maud that, seated there in his own house, she saw him under a new aspect. He played the host with ability and no small amount of tact.

He talked mainly about the stud, interesting her in a subject which she had never before viewed at close quarters. He described various events in which some of his charges had won distinction, and presently, to Bunny's keen delight; he began a brief but stirring description of an attempt to tamp with one of the animals two summers before on the eve of one of the Graydown Races. Some inkling of the intended attempt had reached him, and he himself had lain in wait to frustrate it.

"But how?" cried Bunny breathlessly.

"I decided to spend the night in the loose-box," said Jake. "There's no hardship in sleeping alongside a good horse. I've done it many a time. I wasn't so intimate with Lord Saltash then as I am now, but I knew enough not to be altogether surprised when he came sliding into the stable-yard a little after midnight in a two-seated car and made straight for the loose-box where I was. The top half of the door was ajar, and there was a dim lamp burning in the yard, but his head-lights showed up everything like day. He pushed the top half right back and leaned his arms on the lower and said, 'That you, Bolton?' I got up and went to him. There was no one else about. 'I've put myself in charge this trip,' I told him. 'You needn't be nervous.' He grinned in a sickly sort of fashion and said, 'I am nervous-deuced nervous, and I'll tell you why. If that brute runs to-morrow I'm a ruined man.' And then he started jawing about some fool wager he'd made, said he was under the thumb of some rascally booky, and actually began to try and talk me into spoiling the animal's chances."

Jake paused. He was looking at Maud as if he expected something.

She looked back at him, her head very high, her eyes shining defiantly bright. "Lord Saltash has a double apparently?" she said.

"Now, that's real clever of you!" said Jake, with a smile. "Yes, that is the key to the mystery, and I soon grasped it. He offered me a large sum of money to prevent Pedro running. Pedro was listening to the transaction with his head on my shoulder. I said yes to everything, and then I suggested that we should settle the details outside where there was no chance of witnesses. He agreed to that, and I picked up my whip and got into his car after him, and we slipped out and ran about half-a-mile into the Park where I stopped him."

Jake paused again, still looking expectantly at the girl facing him. She was flushed but evidently not greatly moved.

"What a thrilling recital!" she said.

And, "Go on!" urged Bunny impatiently.

Jake laughed a little. "I felt rather a skunk myself. He was so sweetly unsuspecting, till I used the cowboy clutch on him and tied up his arms in his own coat. That opened his eyes, but it was a bit too late. He was in for a cowhiding, and he realized it, scarcely showed fight, in fact. I didn't let him off on that account, and I don't suppose he has forgotten it to this day. I didn't quite flay him, but I made him feel some."

"And you let him go afterwards?" questioned Bunny.

"Yes, I let him go." Jake took up his cup and drank in a contemplative fashion. "After that," he said, in his slow way, "I went back to Pedro, and we finished the night together. But-I don't know whether having his rest disturbed upset his nerves any-he only managed to come in second after all."

"And Lord Saltash?" said Maud abruptly. "Did you ever tell him what had happened?"

"Oh yes," said Jake. "I told him the following evening, and he laughed in his jolly way and said, 'Well, I'm glad you weren't taken in, but I'm glad too that you let the poor devil go. A leathering from you couldn't have been any such joke.' It wasn't," added Jake grimly. "It was as unlike a joke as a blue pill is unlike raspberry jam."

"But what became of the real man?" questioned Bunny. "Did he get clean away?"

"Clean away," said Jake. "And now-if you're ready-we'll go and see the hero of that episode."

"Who was the hero?" asked Maud, with a hint of sarcasm as she rose.

He looked at her with a faint smile. "Why, Dom Pedro, of course," he said. "Come along and make his acquaintance!"

CHAPTER X

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

It was among the horses that Maud at length saw Jake Bolton in his true element. They were all plainly very dear to his heart. He introduced them as friends. His pockets were stuffed with sugar which both she and Bunny helped to distribute, and not till dusk came upon them did they realize the lateness of the hour.

It was at the last minute that Jake suddenly summoned a little man who was lounging in the gateway. "Here, Sam! I've been telling the lady about your tumble and how they put you together again. It interested her."

Sam approached with a sheepish grin. "I thought I was a goner," he said. "But Mr. Bolton-" he looked at Jake and his grin widened-"he's one of the Never-say-die sort. And the Yankee doctor, well, he was a regular knock-out, he was. Mended me as clean-well, there, you wouldn't never have known I'd had a smash."

One eye wandered down to Bunny in his long chair as he spoke; but he discreetly refrained from comment, and it was Bunny who eagerly broke in with: "What happened to you? Was it your spine? Let's hear!"

Sam was only too willing to oblige. He settled down to his story like a horse into its stride, and for nearly a quarter of an hour Maud stood listening to the account of the miracle which, according to Sam Vickers, the great American doctor had performed.

Bunny drank it all in with feverish avidity. Maud did not like to watch his face. The look it wore went to her heart.

She did not want to glance at Jake either though after a time she felt impelled to do so. His eyes were fixed upon Bunny, but on the instant they came straight to hers as if she had spoken. She avoided them instinctively, but she felt them none the less, as though a dazzling searchlight had suddenly and mercilessly been turned upon her, piercing straight to her soul.

It was soon after this that he quietly intervened to put an end to Sam's reminiscences. It was growing late, and they ought to be moving.

Maud agreed; Bunny protested, and was calmly overruled by Jake. They started back through a pearly greyness of dusk that heralded the rising of the moon. They spoke but little as they went. Bunny seemed suddenly tired, and it did not apparently occur to either of his companions to attempt to make conversation.

Only, as they descended the winding road that led down to Fairharbour and a sudden clamour of church-bells arose through the evening mist, Jake glanced again at the girl who was walking rather wearily by Bunny's side, and said, "Wouldn't you like to go to Church now? I'll see to the youngster."

She shook her head. "Thank you very much; I don't think so."

"Oh, go on, Maud!" exclaimed Bunny, emerging from his reverie. "I don't want you if Jake will stay. I'd sooner have Jake. He doesn't fuss like you."

"I'll get him to bed," Jake went on, as if he had not spoken. "You can trust me to do that, you know. I won't let him talk too much either. Say, Miss Brian, it's a good offer; you'd better close with it."

She heard the smile in the words; and because of it she found she could not refuse. "But I don't like to give you so much trouble," she said.

"You give me pleasure," he answered simply.

At the gate of the churchyard he stopped. "I'll say good-bye," he said. "But don't hurry back! I shall stay as long as I am wanted."

She knew that she could rely upon him in that respect as upon no one else in the world. She gave him her hand with another low word of thanks.

"May I walk to the door with you?" he said, and drew Bunny's chair to one side.

It would have been churlish to refuse. She suffered him in silence.

The church was on an eminence that overlooked the harbour. Reaching the porch, the whole wide view of open sea lay spread before them, flooded in moonlight. The clanging bells above them had sunk to stillness. A peace that seemed unearthly wrapped them round. They stood for the moment quite alone, gazing out to the far, dim sky-line.

And suddenly Maud heard the beating of her heart in the silence, and was conscious of an overwhelming sense of doom.

With an effort that seemed to tear at the very foundations of her being, she turned and walked down a narrow path between the tombstones. He followed her till in breathless agitation she turned again.

"Mr. Bolton!"

Her voice was no more than a whisper. She was thankful that her face was in shadow.

He stood silently, his eyes, alert and bright, fixed intently upon her.

"I must ask you," she said, " – I must beg you-to regard what I said the other day as final. If I am friendly with you, I want you to understand that it is solely for Bunny's sake-no other reason."

"That is understood," said Jake.

She drew the quick breath of one seeking relief. "Then you will forget that-that impossible notion? You will let me forget it too?"

"I shan't remind you of it," said Jake.

"And you will forget it yourself?" she insisted.

He lowered his eyes suddenly, and it was as if a light had unexpectedly gone out. She waited in the dark with a beating heart.

And then with a great clash the bells broke out overhead and further speech became impossible. Jake wheeled without warning, and walked away.

She stood and watched him go, still with that sense of coming fate upon her. Her heart was leaping wildly like a chained thing seeking to escape.

As for Jake, he rejoined Bunny and squarely resumed the journey back to the town, without the smallest sign of discomposure.

He seemed somewhat absent, however, trudging along in almost unbroken silence; and it was not until he laid the boy down at length in his own room that he said, "Now, look here, youngster! If you can't be decently civil to your sister, I've done with you. Understand?"

Bunny turned impulsively and buried his face in Jake's sleeve. "All right. Don't jaw!" he begged in muffled accents.

Jake remained unmoved. "I've been wanting to punch your head most of the afternoon," he remarked severely.

"You can do it now if you like," muttered Bunny, burrowing a little deeper.

Jake did not respond to the invitation. "Why can't you behave yourself anyway?" he said.

He settled Bunny's pillows with a sure hand, and laid him gently back upon them. But Bunny clung to him still.

"You aren't really savage with me, Jake?" he said.

"All right. I'm not," said Jake. "But I won't have it all the same; savvy?"

He put his hand for a moment on Bunny's head and rumbled the dark hair. Bunny's lips quivered unexpectedly.

"It's so-beastly-being managed always by women," he said.

"You don't know when you're lucky," said Jake.

Bunny's emotion passed. He looked at his friend shrewdly. "I suppose you're in love with her," he remarked after a moment.

Jake's eyes met his instantly and uncompromisingly. "Well?" he said.

"Nothing," said Bunny. "Of course she's my sister."

"And so you think you're entitled to a voice in the matter?" Jake's tone was strictly practical. Bunny's fingers slipped into his. "I'm the head of the family, you know, Jake," he said.

The man's face softened to a smile. "Yes, I reckon that's so," he said. "Well? What has the head of the family to say to the notion?"

Bunny turned rather red. "You see, – you're not a mister, are you?" he said.

"Not a gentleman, you mean?" suggested Jake.

Bunny's uneasiness increased. He squeezed Jake's hand very hard in silence.

"All right, little chap," said Jake. "Don't agitate yourself! I'm not what you call a gentleman, – not even a first-class imitation. Let's go on from there! Any other objections?"

"I don't want to be a cad, Jake!" burst from Bunny. "But you know-you know-she might have done a lot better for herself. She might have married Charlie Burchester."

"Who?" said Jake.

"Lord Saltash," explained Bunny. "We thought-everyone thought-five years ago-that they were going to get married. He was awfully keen on her, and she of course was in love with him. And then there was that row with the Cressadys. Lady Cressady got him into a mess, and Sir Philip always was an obnoxious beast. And afterwards Charlie Burchester sheered off and went abroad. He came back after he succeeded, but Maud-she's awfully proud, you know, – she wouldn't look at him, vows she never will again-though I'm not so sure she won't. He's sure to come back some day. He's such a rattling good sort, and he's jolly fond of her."

"And the rest," said Jake drily.

"No, really, Jake, he isn't a rotter. He's an awfully nice chap. You'd say so if you really knew him."

"I do know him," said Jake.

"And you don't like him?" Bunny's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Yes, I like him." Jake's tone was enigmatical. "But I shouldn't call him a marrying man. Anyway, he won't marry your sister, so you can make up your mind to that! Any other gentlemen in the running?"

"You couldn't prevent their being married if-if Maud changed her mind," said Bunny.

Jake smiled. "Anyone else?" he persisted.

"No, no one. She never sees anybody now."

"Except me," said Jake. "And I'm not genteel enough, hey?"

"You're a brick!" said Bunny with enthusiasm. "But, you know, women don't see that sort of thing. They only care about whether a man opens the door for 'em or takes off his glove to shake hands."

Jake broke into a laugh. "Say, sonny, what a thundering lot you know about women!" he said. "Anyway, I conclude I am right in surmising that you personally could swallow me as a brother-in-law?"

Bunny's eyes began to shine. "You're the best fellow I know," he said. "If-if it weren't for Lord Saltash, I wouldn't say a word!"

"Well," said Jake very deliberately, "I refuse to be warned off on his account. That's understood, is it?"

Bunny hesitated. The red-brown eyes were looking full and unwaveringly into his. "I'm not thinking of myself, Jake," he said, with sudden pleading.

Jake's hand closed squarely upon his. "All right, old chap, I know; and I like you for it. But I'm taking odds. It's ninety-nine to one. If I win on the hundredth chance, you'll take it like a sport?"

Bunny's hand returned his grip with all the strength at his command. He was silent for a moment or two; then, impulsively: "I say, Jake," he said, " – you-you're such a sport yourself! I think I'll back you after all."

"Right O!" said Jake. "You won't be sorry."

He dismissed the subject then with obvious intention, and Bunny seemed relieved to let it go. He turned the conversation to Sam Vickers, asking endless questions regarding the American doctor and his miracles.

"I wish he'd come and have a look at me, Jake," he said wistfully at length.

"Thought you didn't like doctors," said Jake.

"Oh, a man like that is different. I'd put up with a man like that," said Bunny, with a sigh.

"You might have to put up with more than you bargained for," said Jake.

Bunny moved his head wearily on the pillow. "I don't think anything could be worse than this," he said.

"I'm glad to hear you say so," said Jake, with sudden force; and then, pulling himself up as suddenly, "No, we won't get talking on that subject. Capper's in America, and you've got to sleep to-night. But you keep a stiff upper lip, old chap! I'm in with you from start to finish. Maybe, some day, we'll work a change."

"You're no end of a trump!" said Bunny with tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER XI

THE DECLARATION OF WAR

For three weeks after that Sunday visit to Jake's home, life went on as usual, and a certain measure of tranquillity returned to Maud.

She found herself able to meet the man without any show of embarrassment, and, finding him absolutely normal in his behaviour towards her, she began to feel a greater confidence in his presence. He had promised that he would not force himself upon her, and it was evident that he had every intention of keeping his word. That he might by imperceptible degrees draw nearer to her, become more intimate, was a possibility that for a time troubled her; but he was so absolutely considerate in all his dealings with her that this fear of hers at length died away. If he were playing a waiting game he did it with a patience so consummate that his tactics were wholly hidden from her. He had to all appearances accepted her decision as final, and put the notion away as impracticable.

Christmas was drawing near, and several visitors had already arrived. There was generally a short season at Christmas, during which the Anchor Hotel had its regular patrons. Its landlord was in an extremely variable state of mind, sometimes aggressive, sometimes jovial, frequently not wholly sober. Maud avoided all contact with him with rigorous persistence, her mother's protests notwithstanding.

"He can't be civil to me," she said, "and he shall not have the opportunity of being anything else."

And no persuasion could move her from this attitude. Mrs. Sheppard was obliged reluctantly to abandon the attempt. She herself was seldom out of favour with her husband, whatever his condition, and that after all was what mattered most.

But the state of affairs was such as was almost bound to lead to a climax sooner or later. Giles Sheppard's hectoring mood was not of the sort to be satisfied for long with passive avoidance. Every glimpse he had of the girl, who ate his bread but disdained to do so in his company or the company of his friends, inflamed him the more hotly against her. It needed but a pretext to set his wrath ablaze, and a pretext was not far to seek.

One day about a week before Christmas he unexpectedly presented himself at the door of Bunny's room.

The weather was damp and raw, and a cheerful fire burned there. Bunny was lying among pillows on the sofa. He had had a bad night, and his face, as he turned it to the intruder, was white and drawn.

"What on earth-" he began querulously.

Sheppard entered with arrogance, leaving the door wide open behind him. "Look here!" he said harshly. "You've got to turn out of this. The room is wanted."

Maud, who was dusting the room as was her daily custom, turned swiftly round with something of the movement of a tigress. Her face was pale also. She had slept even less than Bunny the previous night. Her blue eyes shone like two flames under her knitted brows.

"What do you mean?" she said.

He looked at her with insult in his eyes. "I mean just that, my fine madam," he said. "This room is wanted. The boy will have to go with the rest of the lumber-at the top of the house."

It was brutally spoken, but the brutality was aimed at her, not Bunny. Maud realized that fact, and curbed her resentment. She could endure-or so she fancied-his personal hostility with fortitude. But his announcement was sufficiently disquieting in itself.

"I understood that we were not to be disturbed at any time," she said, meeting his look with that icy pride of hers that was the only weapon at her command. "Surely some other arrangement can be made?"

Sheppard growled out a strangled oath; she always made him feel at a disadvantage, this slip of a girl whom he could have picked up with one hand had he chosen.

"I tell you, this room is wanted," he reiterated stormily. "You'd better clear out at once."

"Bunny can't possibly be moved to-day," Maud said quickly and decidedly. "He is in pain. Can't you see for yourself how impossible it is? I am quite sure no visitor who knew the facts of the case would wish to turn him out."

Sheppard stamped a furious foot. He was getting up his fury; and suddenly she saw that he had been drinking. The knowledge came upon her in a flash of understanding, and with it a disgust so complete that it overwhelmed every other consideration.

She pointed to the door. "Go!" she said, in tense, frozen accents. "Go at once! How dare you come in here in this state?"

Before her withering disdain he drew back, as it were involuntarily. He even half turned to obey. Then, suddenly some devil prompted him, and he swung back again. With one gigantic stride he reached the sofa; and before either brother or sister knew what he intended to do he had roughly seized upon the boy's slight body and lifted it in his great arms.

Bunny's agonized outcry at the action mingled with his sister's, but it ceased almost immediately. He collapsed in the giant grip like an empty sack, and Sheppard, now wrought to a blind fury that had no thought for consequences, carried him from the room and along the passage to the stairs, utterly unheeding the fact that he had fainted.

Maud, nearly beside herself, went with him, striving to support the limp body where long experience had taught her support was needed. They went up the stairs so, flight after flight, Sheppard savage and stubborn, the girl in a dumb agony of anxiety, seeking only to relieve the dreadful strain that had bereft Bunny of his senses.

They reached at length a room at the top of the house, a bare garret of a place with sloping ceiling and uncarpeted floor. There was a bed under the skylight, and on this the man deposited his burden.

Then he turned and looked at Maud with eyes of cruel malevolence. "This is good enough for you and yours," he said.

Over Bunny's body she flung her fruitless defiance. "You drunken brute!" she said. "You loathsome coward! You hateful, tipsy bully!"

The words pierced him like the stabs of a dagger too swift to evade. He was sober enough to be cowed.

From the door he looked back at her, where she stood at the bedside, upright, quivering, a dart-like creature full of menace despite her delicacy of form and fibre. Again he knew himself to be at a disadvantage. He had not drunk enough to be intrepid. Swearing and malignant, he withdrew like a savage beast. But as he went, the madness of hatred rose in a swirl to his brain. She had defied him, had she? Her bitter words rang again and again in his ears. She had proclaimed him a drunkard, a coward, a bully! And she thought he would put up with it. Did she? Did she? Thought she could insult him with impunity in his own house! Thought he would tamely endure her impertinences for all time! He ground his teeth as he went down to the bar. He would have a reckoning with her presently. Yes, there should be a reckoning. He had borne with her too long-too long! Now matters had come to a head. She would either have to humble herself or go.

He had tried to be patient. He had hoped that Jake Bolton would soon relieve him of the unwelcome burden he had taken upon himself. Jake could tame her; he was quite sure of that. But Jake seemed to be making no headway. He had even begun to wonder lately if Jake meant business after all.

In any case he was at the end of his patience; and when his wife came to him with tears to remonstrate on behalf of poor little Bunny he hardened himself against her and refused to discuss the subject.

As for Maud, she spent the rest of the day in trying to make Bunny's new quarters habitable. She hoped with all her heart that Jake would come in the evening so that they could move him into the room she occupied, a floor lower, which had at least a fireplace. But for once Jake disappointed her, and so the whole day passed in severe pain for Bunny and vexation of spirit for her.

Towards evening to her relief he began to doze. She watched beside him anxiously. He had been very plucky, displaying an odd protective attitude towards herself that had gone to her heart; but she knew that at times he had suffered intensely and the fact had been almost more than she could bear. She knew that it would be days before he would shake off the effects of the rough handling he had received, and she dreaded the future with a foreboding that made her feel physically sick.

Now that Sheppard's animosity had developed into active hostility, she knew that the situation could not last much longer, but how to escape it remained a problem unsolved. Her uncle had made no reply to her letter. She could not write to him again. And there was no one else to whom she could appeal. Alone, she could have faced the world and somehow made a way for herself; but with Bunny—She clenched her hands in impotent anguish. There was only one person in the world willing to lift the burden from her, only one person besides herself who really cared for Bunny. She suddenly began to tremble. That sense of approaching doom was upon her again. The current had caught her surely, surely, and was whirling her away.

Bunny stirred—as though somehow caught in the net of her emotions—stirred and came out of uneasy slumber.

"I say, Maud!"

"What is it, darling? Are you uncomfortable?" There was a wealth of mother-love in her low voice as she bent above him.

Bunny put out a cold, moist hand. "I say, Maud," he said again, "Jake's a good sort. You like Jake, don't you?"

"Yes, darling," she answered soothingly.

He turned his head on the pillow; she could feel his fingers opening and closing in the restless way he had. "I like him too," he said. "I like him awfully. He's—the real thing. I wish—"

"What, Bunny?" There was constraint in her voice, and she knew it, but it was a subject upon which she could not bring herself to speak freely. She dreaded his answer more than she could have said.

Possibly he divined the fact, for he heaved a sharp sigh and said, "Nothing," in a tone that told her that he was very far from satisfied.

But she could not pursue the matter. Thankfully she let it drop.

The evening wore away. There was only one candle in the room. By it she and Bunny ate the supper which Maud herself had fetched from the kitchen. No one had time to wait upon them. The boy was still trying to make the best of things, and she marvelled at his courage.

When the meal was over he looked at her with a faint smile under his drawn brows. "Look here, Maud! There's that bed in the corner. Can't you make it comfortable and get a good night for once?"

She looked at him in surprise. It was very unusual for Bunny to give a thought to her comfort.

"Yes, I want you to," he said. "Go and undress, and then bring your blankets up here! You can't sit up all night in a straight-backed chair, so you may as well be comfortable. Don't stare! Go and do it!"

The bed in the corner was a thing of broken springs and crippled frame-work, but it had a mattress of straw albeit bedclothes were lacking. Bunny's suggestion seemed feasible, and since it was plain that he would not be content unless she followed it she yielded without demur. Her own room was only a flight of stairs away, and she had already fetched several things from it for his comfort. She hoped to get him down to it on the following day, if only Jake would come. It was neither warm nor spacious, but it was preferable to this fireless attic.

She brought the blankets, and arranged the bed. "I don't think I'll undress, Bunny," she said.

"You are to," said Bunny. "Jake says no one can possibly rest properly without."

She was inclined to resent this assertion of Jake's teaching, but again she yielded. Bunny was in a mood to work himself into a fever if his behests were not obeyed.

She went down and undressed therefore, and presently slipped up to him again, hoping to find him asleep. But he was wide-eyed and restless.

"It's so beastly cold," he said. "I can't sleep. My feet are like stones. Where's the fur rug?"

She looked round for it. "Oh, Bunny, I'm so sorry. I must have left it in your room downstairs. Never mind! Here's a blanket instead!"

She was already pulling it off her bed when Bunny asserted himself once more.

"Maud, I won't have it! I will not have it! Do you hear? Put it back again! Why can't you go and fetch the fur rug?"

"My dear, I can't go down like this," she objected.

"Rot!" said Bunny. "Everyone's gone to bed by now. If you don't get it, they'll be turning the room out in the morning, and it'll get lost. Besides, you look all right."

She was wearing no more than a light wrap over her night-dress; but, as Bunny said, it was probable that everyone had retired, for the hour was late. Only a few dim lights were left burning in the passages. There would be no one about, and it would not take two minutes to slip down and get the rug. She dropped the blanket he had refused, and went softly out.

CHAPTER XII

THE RECKONING

The whole house was in silence as noiselessly she stole down the stairs. It was close upon midnight, and she did not meet or hear anyone. The place might have been empty, so still was it.

The long, long roar of the sea came to her as she groped her way down the winding, dark passage that led to the room from which Bunny had been so rudely ejected a few hours before. There was no light here, but she knew her way perfectly, and, finding the door, softly opened it and turned on the electric light.

The room was just as she had left it, the sofa drawn up by the burnt-out fire. She had collected all Bunny's things earlier in the evening, but, since the rug had been forgotten, she thought it advisable to take the opportunity of ascertaining if anything else had been left behind. She found the rug, pushed the sofa back against the wall, and began a quiet search of all the drawers and other receptacles the room contained.

She had almost finished her task, and was just closing the writing-table drawer when a sudden sound made her start. A creaking footstep came from the passage beyond the open door. She turned swiftly with a jerking heart to see her step-father, bloated and malignant, standing on the threshold.

For a single instant he stood there looking at her, and a great throb of misgiving went through her at the savage triumph in his eyes. He had been drinking, drinking heavily she was sure; but he did not seem to be intoxicated, only horribly sure of himself, brutally free from any trammels of civilization. He closed the door with decision, and moved forward.

In the same moment she moved also towards the sofa over which she had thrown the rug she had come to fetch. Her heart was beating hard and fast, but she would not address a single word to him, would not so much as seem to see him. Supremely disdainful, she prepared to gather up her property and go.

But as she turned to the door she found him barring the way. He spoke, thickly yet not indistinctly.

"Not so fast, my fine madam! I've got to have a reckoning with you."

She drew herself up to the utmost of her slim height, and gave him a single brief glance of disgust. "Be good enough to let me pass!" she said, in tones of clear command.

But Sheppard did not move. He had been fortifying himself against any sudden strain such as this all day long.

"Not so fast!" he said again, with a gleam of teeth under his dark moustache. "You made a mistake this morning, young woman; a very big mistake. Don't make another to-night!"

Maud froze to an icier contempt. The steady courage of her must have shamed any man in his sober senses.

"Stand aside instantly," she said, "or I shall ring the bell and rouse the house!"

He laughed at that, a cruel, vindictive laugh. "Oh, you don't come over me that way! You mean to have your lesson, I see, and p'raps it's as well. It's been postponed too long already. There's a deal too much spirit about you, and too much lip too. You think I'll put up with anything, don't you? Think yourself much too high and mighty to associate with the likes of me? Think you can call me any darn' names you please, and I'll bear 'em like a lamb?"

His voice rose. Obviously his temper was already beyond control. He was in fact lashing it on to fury. Maud knew the process well.

It was enough for her, and she waited for no more. She stepped quietly to the bell.

She was nearer to it than he, and she did not for a moment imagine that he would dare to molest her. But she had not realized the maddened condition to which he had wrought himself; and even when he suddenly and violently strode forward she did not draw back or dream that he would touch her.

Only as his hand caught her outstretched arm did the knowledge that he was as utterly beyond control as a wild beast burst upon her. She uttered a desperate cry, and began a sharp, instinctive struggle to escape.

It was a very brief struggle, so taken by surprise and utterly unprepared was she. One moment she was fighting wildly for freedom; the next he had her at his mercy.

"Oh, you may scream!" he gibed. "No one will hear you! Now-do you know what I am going to do to you?"

"Let me go!" she panted, crimson and breathless.

He locked her two wrists together in one iron hand. His strength was utterly irresistible. She was as a pigmy in the grip of a giant.

"I'll let you go when I've done with you," he said, gloating openly over her quivering helplessness. "But first you will have your lesson. I'm going to give you the trouncing of your life!"

With the words he suddenly wrenched her round and forced her, almost flung her, face downwards over the sofa-head.

"You've been spoiling for this for a long time," he said, "and-being your step-father-I'll see that you get it. Never had a good spanking before in all your life, I daresay? Well, well see how you like this one!"

And therewith he pulled off one of his down-at-heel carpet slippers and proceeded to flog her with it, as if she had been a boy.

What she went through during that awful chastisement Maud never forgot. She fought at first like a mad creature till she was suddenly aware of the light wrap she wore ripping in all directions, and from that moment she resisted no more, standing passive in an agony of apprehension while he wreaked upon her all the pent malice of the past few weeks.

It was a brutal punishment, administered with the savage intention of breaking down the stark silence with which she sought to meet it. And even when he succeeded at last, even when the girl's strength went from her and she collapsed as he held her with a wild burst of hysterical crying and broken, unnerved entreaties, he did not stay his hand. Now was his grand opportunity for vengeance, and he might never get another. He did not spare her until he had inflicted the utmost of which he was capable.

Then at last roughly he set her free. "That's right! Blub away!" he jeered. "I've taken all the stiffening out of you at last, and a damn' good job too. P'raps you'll keep a civil tongue in your head for the future, and give me no more of your dratted impudence. There's nothing like a sound drubbing to bring a woman to her senses. But I don't advise you to qualify for another."

He put on his slipper, breathing somewhat heavily after his exertions, then stood up and wiped his forehead. His fury had exhausted itself. His mood had become one of semi-malicious elation.

He looked at the girl still crouched over the sofa-head, sobbing and convulsed, utterly broken, utterly conquered.

"Come!" he said. "Don't let us have any more nonsense! You won't give me any more of your airs after this, and we shall be all the better friends for it. Stand up and say you're sorry!"

She gasped and gasped again, but no words could she utter. The hateful callousness of the man could not so much as rouse her scorn. Her pride was in the dust.

He took her by the arm and pulled her roughly up, making her stand before him though she was scarcely capable of standing.

"Come!" he began again, and broke off with a brutal laugh, staring at her.

A flame of fierce humiliation went through her, burning her from head to foot as she realized that her night-dress had been rent open across her bosom. She caught it together in her trembling fingers, shrinking in an anguish of shame from the new devil that had begun to gibe at her out of his bloodshot eyes.

He laughed again. "Well, my fine madam, we seem to have pitched the proprieties overboard quite completely this time. All your own fault, you know. Serves you jolly well right. You aren't going to say you're sorry, eh? Well, well, I'd give you another spanking if I felt equal to it, but I don't. So I'll have the kiss of peace instead."

He caught her to him with the words, gripped her tightly round the body, tilted her head back; and for one unspeakable moment the heavy moustache was crushed suffocatingly upon her panting lips.

In that moment the strength of madness entered into Maud, such strength as was later wholly beyond her own comprehension. With frenzied force she resisted him, fighting as if for her very life, and so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that in sheer astonishment his grip relaxed.

It was her one chance of escape, and she seized it. With a single furious wrench she tore herself from him, not caring how she did it, found herself free, and fled, fled like a mad thing, panting, dishevelled, frantic, from the room.

His laugh of half-tipsy derision followed her, and all the devils of hatred, malice, and bitter cauterizing shame went with her as she fled.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ONLY PORT

It was a rainy, squally morning, and Jake returning from the Stables after an early ride, looked down at his muddy gaiters with momentary hesitation. Mrs. Lovelace, his cook and housekeeper, objected very strongly to muddy gaiters in what she was pleased to call "her parlour." They generally meant disaster to a clean table-doth, though Jake himself could never be made to see why, since he was the only person to use it and never noticed its condition, this should be regarded as a matter of vital importance.

On the present occasion, Mrs. Lovelace being out of sight and hearing, he decided to risk detection, and, leaving his cap on a peg in the dark oak passage, he passed on to the room overlooking the downs and the distant sea in which he had once entertained Bunny and his sister.

Breakfast would be awaiting him, he knew; and he was more than ready for breakfast. In fact he was ravenously hungry, and he hastened to hide the offending gaiters under the spotless table-doth as soon as he had rung the bell for the dish which was being kept hot for him.

When Mrs. Lovelace came stoutly in, he greeted her with a smile. "I'm late this morning. Been having a tussle with one of the youngsters. No, don't put that whip away! It wants a new lash. What a cussed nuisance this rain is! The ground is a quagmire, and the animals can hardly keep their feet. Any letters?"

"One, sir," said Mrs. Lovelace, and laid it before him. Then she looked at him searchingly. "Did you get very muddy?" she enquired.

"What?" said Jake. He took up his letter. "Yes, you can take the cover. No, leave the coffee! I'll pour that out when I'm ready. Muddy? Look out of the window, my good woman, if you want to know! Don't wait! Time's precious, and I guess you're busy."

Again he smiled upon Mrs. Lovelace, his pleasant, candid smile; and Mrs. Lovelace had perforce to smile back and withdraw.

Jake heaved a sigh of relief, and began his breakfast. His letter, bearing a purple crest of a fox's head and under it the motto: *Sans Vertu*, lay on the table before him. He eyed it as he ate, and presently took it up. It bore a Swiss stamp.

Jake opened it and read:

"DEAR BOLTON,

"I meant to winter in Cairo, and heaven alone knows why I am here. It is fiendishly cold, and blowing great guns. There was skating when I arrived, but that is a dream of the oast. We now slop about knee-deep in slush or play cat's cradle in the *salon* during the day. We dance or cuddle in corners practically all night. Some of the female portion of the community are quite passably attractive, but I always preferred one goddess to a crowd, and she is not to be found here. Unless it freezes within the next forty-eight hours, I shall come back to beastly old England and look for her. So if I should turn up at Burchester within the next few days, please accept this (the only) intimation and have the stud ready for inspection.

"Yours sincerely,

"SALTASH."

Jake's face wore a curious expression as he folded the letter and returned it to the envelope. It was what Bunny called his "cowboy" look—a look in which humour and sheer, savage determination were very oddly mingled. There was a good deal of the primitive man about him at that moment. He continued his breakfast with business-like rapidity and presently helped himself to coffee with a perfectly steady hand.

The cup, however, was still untasted beside him when Mrs. Lovelace once more made her appearance, her plump face looking somewhat startled.

"Miss Brian has called, sir. Wishes to see you for a moment. Shall I show her in?"

Jake's chair scraped back and he was on his feet in a single movement. "Of course! Where is she? No, I'll fetch her myself. Out of the way, my good woman!"

He removed her from his path without the smallest ceremony, and was gone before she could protest.

In the passage he almost ran into his visitor. "Miss Brian! Is that you? Come right in! Snakes! You're wet. Come along to the fire!"

He had her by it before his greeting was fully uttered. A man of action at all times, was Jake. And Maud, still panting from her recent struggle with the elements, found herself in an easy-chair, holding numbed fingers to the blaze almost before she realized how she came to be there. He knelt beside her, unbuttoning her streaming waterproof. She saw the glint of the firelight on his chestnut hair.

"Thank you," she said, with an effort. "You are very kind."

He looked at her with those lynx-like eyes of his. "Say, you're perished!" he said, in his soft, easy drawl.

She smiled quiveringly at the concern in his face. She had expected a precipitate enquiry about Bunny, but it was evident that he had thoughts only for her at that moment. And she was very badly in need of human kindness and consideration just then.

She sat huddled over the fire, all the queenliness gone out of her, tried to speak to him twice and failed; finally, shook her head and sat in silence.

He got up and reached across the table for the coffee he had just poured out.

"Drink a little!" he said, holding it to her. "You need it."

She made a small gesture of impotence. Somehow the warmth and comfort of the room after the cheerless cold without had upset her. She still smiled, but it was a puckered, difficult smile, and her eyes were full of tears. She could not take the cup. Her throat worked painfully. Again she shook her head.

Jake stood beside her for a moment or two looking down at her, then with swift decision he set down the coffee, stepped to the door and quietly turned the key.

He came back to her with the steady purpose of a man quite sure of himself, knelt again by her side, put his arm about her.

"You lean on me, my girl!" he said softly. "Don't be afraid!"

She gave him a quick look. The tears were running down her face. She covered it suddenly with both hands and sobbed.

He drew her to him so gently that she was hardly aware of the action till her head came to rest on his shoulder. His free hand, strong and purposeful, took possession of one of hers and sturdily held it.

"It's all right," he murmured to her soothingly. "It's all right."

She wept for awhile without restraint, her nerves completely shattered, her pride laid low. And while she wept, Jake held her, strongly, sustainingly, his red-brown eyes staring unblinkingly full into the heart of the fire.

At the end of a long interval she grew a little calmer, made as if she would withdraw herself. But very quietly he frustrated her.

"No, not while you're feeling so badly. Say, now, let me take off your hat! Guess I can do it without you moving."

She was not in a condition to forbid him, and he removed it with considerable dexterity, while she still hid her quivering face against him with an instinctive confidence that paid a dumb tribute to the man's complete mastery of himself.

"I'm dreadfully sorry-to have behaved like this," she whispered at last.

"You needn't be sorry for that," said Jake. "No one will know except me. And I don't count."

"I think you do," she faltered, and made a more decided effort to free herself.

He let her go with a kindly pat on the shoulder. "Say, now, if that coffee ain't cold, p'raps you'll try a sip."

He reached for it and held it to her without rising. She lifted the cup in both her trembling hands while he held the saucer, and slowly drank.

Jake's eyes went with abrupt directness to her wrists as she did it. He did not speak at the moment. Only as she returned the cup he put it quietly aside and laid his hand over hers.

"What's that skunk Sheppard been doing to you?" he asked.

She shrank at the straight question "How-how did you know-"

He lifted his hand and pushed back her sleeves without speaking. There was something dreadful about him as he regarded the bruises thus exposed.

A quick fear went through her. "Jake," she said sharply, "that-is no affair of yours. You are not to-interfere."

His eyes came up to hers and the hardness went from him on the instant. "I reckon you're going to make some use of me," he said.

She trembled a little and turned her face away. She had used his Christian name spontaneously, and now suddenly she found that all formality had gone from between them. It disconcerted her, frightened her, made her uncertain as to his attitude as well as her own.

"To say-what?" Her hands moved agitatedly beneath his till strangely, unexpectedly, they turned and clasped it with convulsive strength. "Yes, I am afraid," she said, with a sob.

"But I asked you to marry me weeks ago," said Jake.

Her head was bowed. She sought to avoid his look. "I know you did."

"And you are going to marry me," he said, in a tone that was scarcely a question.

She turned desperately and faced him. "I must have a clear understanding with you first," she said.

"I-see," said Jake.

He met her eyes with the utmost directness, and before his look hers wavered and fell. "Please!" she whispered. "You must agree to that."

He did not speak for a moment, but his fingers wound themselves closely about her own.

"I don't want you to be scared," he said finally. "But-that's a mighty big thing you've asked of me."

Maud's face was burning. "I knew it isn't for me to make-conditions," she said, under her breath.

A gleam of humour crossed Jake's face. "I guess it's up to me to accept or refuse," he said. "But-suppose I refuse-what are you going to do then? Will you marry me-all the same?"

She shook her head instantly. "I don't know what I shall do, Jake. I-I must go back and think."

She mustered her strength and made as if she would rise, but he checked her.

"Wait!" he said. "I haven't refused-yet. Lean back and rest a bit! I've got to do some thinking too."

She obeyed him because it seemed that he must be obeyed. He got to his feet.

"Poor girl!" he said gently. "It hasn't been easy for you, has it? Reckon you've just been driven to me for refuge. I'm the nearest port, that's all."

"The only port," Maud answered, with a shiver.

"All right," he said. "It's a safe one. But-" He left the sentence unfinished and turned to the window.

She lay back with closed eyes, counting the hard throbs of her heart while she waited. He was very quiet, standing behind her with his face to the storm-driven clouds. She longed to know what was passing in his mind, but she could not break the silence. It held her like a spell while the clock on the mantelpiece ticked the dragging minutes away. She whispered to her racing heart that the moment

he moved she would rise and go. But while the silence lasted she could not bring herself to stir. She was worn out physically and mentally, almost too weary for thought.

He moved at length rather suddenly, wheeled round before she was aware, and came back to the fire.

"Don't get up!" he said. "You look ready to drop, and you may just as well hear what I have to say sitting. It won't make a mite of difference."

She raised her eyes to his in unconscious appeal. "I am afraid I have made a mistake," she said.

She saw his smile for a moment. "No, you haven't made a mistake, my girl. You're safe with me. But I wonder if you have the faintest idea now why I want you for my wife."

The simple directness of his speech touched her as she did not want to be touched. She sat silent, her hands clasped tightly together.

"You haven't," he said. "And p'raps this isn't the time to tell you. You've come to me for refuge—as I hoped you would—and I shan't abuse your confidence. But, you know, I had a reason."

He paused, but she still said nothing. Only she could not meet his eyes any longer. She looked away into the fire, waiting for him to continue.

"Say, now," he said, after a moment, "if I make a bargain with you, you won't accuse me of taking advantage of your position?"

She winced a little. "I wish you-to forget-that I ever said that."

"All right. It is forgotten," said Jake. "I'll go ahead. We haven't mentioned Bunny though I take it he is a fairly big factor in the case. That is to say, if it hadn't been for Bunny, you would never have taken this step."

Maud's eyes went swiftly up to his. "But of course I shouldn't!" she said quickly. "I thought you understood that."

"I quite understand," said Jake. "I assure you I'm not taking anything for granted. But now—I want to put it to you—supposing the impossible happened, supposing Bunny were cured, — yes, it's only the hundredth chance, I know—still, just for a moment, suppose it! Bunny cured, able to look after himself like other lads. You would be married to me. What then?"

"What then?" She repeated the words, still with an effort meeting his look.

He made a slight gesture with one hand. "You would stick to me?"

The hot colour flooded her face and neck. "Of course," she said, her voice very low. "That goes without saying."

He bent slowly towards her. "Maud, if we ever live alone together, it must be as man and wife."

His voice was low too, but she heard in it a deep note that seemed to pierce through and through her. His eyes drew and held her own. She wanted to avoid them but could not. They burned like the red, inner heart of a furnace.

The blood receded from her face. She felt it go. "We-need never live alone," she said faintly.

He held out a quiet hand to her. "P'raps not. But I should like your promise to that, all the same." He paused a moment; then added: "I have sworn already to be good to you, remember."

She laid her hand in his. She could not do otherwise. He held it and waited.

"Very well," she said at last, her voice almost a whisper. "I-agree."

He let her go, and straightened himself. "It's a deal, then," he said. "And now for more immediate details. You've decided to marry me, and I gather you don't mind how soon?"

He picked up a clay pipe from the mantelpiece, and knocked out some ash against the fireplace.

Maud watched him with a curious species of fascination. There was something in the man's serenity of mien that puzzled her, something that did not go with those fiery, possessive eyes.

He looked at her with a smile that was half-quizzical, half-kindly, and her heart began to beat more freely.

"We must somehow get away from 'The Anchor' to-day," she said. "I have a little money. Perhaps if you would help me to move Bunny, we could go into lodgings again until—"

"I have a little money too," said Jake. "And I will certainly help you. But first, – do you object to telling me what has been happening at 'The Anchor'?"

She coloured again vividly, painfully, but he was fully engrossed with the filling of his pipe and did not notice her embarrassment.

"To begin with," she said with difficulty, "he-Mr. Sheppard-has turned us out of the room downstairs. He carried Bunny off himself to an attic under the roof, and hurt him horribly. I was driven nearly mad at the time." She broke off, shuddering at the remembrance.

Jake frowned. "Go on!" he said briefly.

She went on with increasing difficulty. "That happened yesterday. I hoped you would come round in the afternoon or evening, but you didn't."

"I couldn't get away," he interpolated. "Yes? And then?"

"Then-in the evening-that is, late at night-" Maud stumbled like a nervous child-"I went down to fetch something and he-he came in after me, half-tipsy; and-and-he-" She halted suddenly. "I can't go on!" she said, with quivering lips.

Jake laid aside his pipe and stooped over her. "Did he beat you, or did he make love to you? Which?" he said.

There was a sound in his voice like the growl of an angry beast. She could not look him in the face.

"Tell me!" he said, and laid an imperative hand on her shoulder. "You need never tell anyone else."

She shrank a little. "I don't see why I should tell you," she said reluctantly.

"You must tell me," said Jake with decision.

And, after brief hesitation, miserably, with face averted, she yielded and told him. After all, why should he not know? Her dainty pride was crushed for ever. She could sink no lower.

"He held me down and thrashed me-with his slipper. I was in my night-dress, and-and it was rather a brutal thrashing. Perhaps some women wouldn't have minded it much; but I-I am not used to that kind of treatment. I hope you will never beat me, Jake. I don't bear it very heroically."

She tried to laugh, but it was a piteous little sound that came from her quivering throat.

Jake's hand closed upon her shoulder. She seemed to feel the whole man vibrate behind it like a steel spring. Yet he made no comment whatever. "Go on!" he said, his voice short and stern. "Tell me everything!"

She braced herself to finish. "He went on till he was tired. I believe I was wailing like a baby, but no one heard. And then-and then-he suddenly discovered that I was a woman and not a naughty child, and he-he-kissed me." She shuddered suddenly and violently. "That's nearly all," she ended. "I got away from him, heaven knows how. And I got back to Bunny. I didn't tell him everything, but I couldn't help him knowing I was upset. We neither of us slept all night. And the night before was a bad one too. That's how I came to be so idiotic just now."

She leaned slowly back in her chair till she rested against the hand he had laid upon her.

"Do you know," she said tremulously, after a moment, "I think it has actually done me good to tell you? You are very kind to me, Jake."

He withdrew his hand and turned away. "That may be," he said enigmatically. "And again it may not. Thanks anyway for telling me." He picked up the horsewhip that he had flung down on entering, and began with his square, steady fingers to remove the lash. "You are right. You can't spend another night at 'The Anchor.' If you will allow me, I will find some comfortable rooms where you and Bunny can stay till we can get married. I will go up to-morrow and get a special licence. The marriage might be arranged for Sunday-if that will suit you."

"Next Sunday?" Maud started round and looked at him with startled eyes.

He nodded. "In church. After the eight o'clock service if there is one. Your mother must give you away. Afterwards, we will come on here with the boy." He glanced round at her. "He shall have

this room for the daytime, and the one over it to sleep in. I'm sorry there are not two ground-floor rooms for him; but I know how to carry him in comfort. Of course, if necessary this room could be used as a bedroom as well."

He threw down the worn lash and went to a drawer for a new one. Maud still watched him in silence.

"Does that meet with your approval?" he asked at length.

"I think you are-more than good," she said, a tremor of feeling in her voice.

He kept his eyes lowered over his task. "I am not hustling you too much?" he enquired.

She smiled wanly. "I am asking myself if I ought to let you do it," she said. "It doesn't seem very fair to you."

"It chances to be the thing I want," said Jake, his fingers still busy. "And I reckon you won't disappoint me-won't draw back? I can count on you?"

She rose, turning fully towards him. "You can certainly count on me," she said. "But are you really sure you meant it? It isn't going to spoil your life?"

Jake stood upright with a jerk. She met the extraordinary brightness of his eyes with an odd mixture of boldness and reluctance.

"My girl," he said, in his queer, anomalous drawl, "there ain't a man anywhere in God's universe who knows what he wants better than I do. If I didn't want this thing I shouldn't ask for it. See?" He came to her with the words, and laid one finger on her arm. "Don't you know it's your friendship I'm after?" he said, with a touch of aggressiveness. "Why, I've been after it ever since that night I found you down in the dark alone on the edge of the parade. You were up against it that night, weren't you? And didn't like me over much for butting in. Do you know what you made me think of? A forlorn princess of the Middle Ages. There's a mediæval flavour about you. I don't know where you keep it. But it makes me feel mediæval too."

She drew back a little, stiffened ever so slightly. Something in her resented the freedom of his speech. Something rose in swift revolt and clamoured to be gone.

He must have seen her gesture, her quick, protesting blush; for he turned almost instantly and jerked the whip-lash through his fingers, testing it.

A fitful gleam of sunshine suddenly pierced the clouds behind him and shone on his bent head. His hair gleamed like burnished copper. The tawny glint of it made her think of an animal—a beast of prey, alert, merciless, primeval.

She put on her hat. "I must be getting back to Bunny," she said.

"I am coming with you," said Jake.

She looked at him sharply. "You will walk?"

"Yes, I shall walk."

She pointed with nervous abruptness to the whip he held. "Then you won't want that."

Jake smiled, and tested the whip again without speaking.

Maud waited a moment; then steadily she spoke. "You realized of course, that when I told you about Mr. Sheppard's behaviour of last night, it was in strict confidence?"

Jake squared his broad shoulders. "All right, my girl. It's safe with me," he said. "There shan't be any scandal."

Maud was very white, but quite resolute. "Jake," she said, "you are not to do it."

He raised his brows.

"You are not to do it!" she said again, with vehemence. "I mean it! I mean it! The quarrel is not yours. You are not to make it so." She paused, and suddenly caught her breath. "Oh, don't look at me like that! You make me-afraid!"

Jake turned and tossed the whip down on the window-seat. "You've nothing to be afraid of," he said rather curtly. "You're making your own bugbear. P'raps it's natural," he added, with abrupt

gentleness. "You've had a lot to bear lately. There! I've done what you asked. We had better get back while it's fine."

He unlocked and opened the door, standing back for her to pass.

He kept his eyes downcast as she went through, and she knew that it was in response to her appeal that he did so. She tingled with a burning embarrassment, which vanished all in a moment as he said: "Say, now, do you mind if I light my pipe before I follow you? Don't wait! I'll catch you up."

And she made her way out into the fleeting sunlight and racing wind with a strong sense of relief. The pipe was not a particularly aristocratic feature of Jake's existence, but it was an extremely characteristic one, and it placed matters on a normal footing at once. Jake was never disconcerting or formidable when he was smoking a pipe. She consented to it gladly.

And Jake turned back into the room with a grim smile on his lips, picked up a letter from the table, and thrust it deep into the fire.

After that he lighted his pipe with the charred remnants thereof, and followed Maud into the open.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WAY OF ESCAPE

The sun shone out again as they went down the hill, and the sea gleamed below them like a sheet of silver.

"You like this place?" asked Jake.

"I could like it," she made answer.

He smiled. "Then I reckon you shall. Say, does Bunny know about your coming up here to me?"

She coloured deeply. "He knew I came, yes. He did not know why."

Jake was still smiling. "Guess he'll be pleased," he said. He added, between puffs at his pipe: "We'll make him happy between us. We'll give him the time of his life."

She drew a deep breath. Surely no sacrifice was too great for that!

They passed the church on the hill, and descended the steep road to the town.

"There are some rooms I know of along this road," said Jake. "Kept by the wife of one of our stable-men. Shall we go in and have a look at 'em?"

She hesitated. "Bunny will wonder where I am."

He glanced at her. "Well, look here! You leave me to see to it. I'll fix up something, and then I'll come on after you and we'll get the boy away."

She met his look somewhat doubtfully.

"Why not?" said Jake.

She answered him with an effort. "You do understand, don't you, that I couldn't-I can't-accept help from you before-before-our marriage?"

"Why not?" he said again. "Reckon you mean to stick to your bargain?"

"Oh, it isn't that," she said painfully. "Of course-of course-I shall keep my word with you. But I have a little pride left-just a little-and-"

"And I'm to humour it, eh?" said Jake. "Well, you shall have it your own way. But let me do the fixing for you! I know just what you want. It's only for a few days either."

He smiled at her, and she yielded.

But when they separated at length she paused uneasily. "Jake!"

"Your servant!" said Jake promptly.

She stretched a nervous hand towards him. "Jake, if you meet-my step-father, you will not-not-"

"Most unfortunately I can't," said Jake. He held her hand for a moment, and let it go. "There! Good-bye! I won't do anything indiscreet, I promise you. There is too much at stake. Now you get back to Bunny as quick as you can! I shan't be long after you."

And Maud went with a feeling at the heart of relief and dread oddly mingled. She knew that Jake would keep his word. There was a rocklike strength about him that nothing could ever shake. For good or ill, he would stick to a bargain, be the price what it might. But she saw him overriding every obstacle to attain his purpose. He would never flinch from possible consequences; of that she was certain. What he had said he would do, that he would do, and no power on earth would divert him therefrom.

She shivered suddenly and violently as she walked. The relentless force of the man had in it an element that was terrible. What had she done? What had she done?

She encountered her mother as she mounted the hotel stairs.

"Oh, my dear, here you are at last!" was her greeting. "I have been so worried about you. Come into my room!"

But Maud resisted her. "I must go to Bunny. He has been alone for so long."

"No, dear, no! Bunny's all right for the present. I've been to see. He doesn't want anything. He told me so. Come into my room-just for a moment, dear child! We can't talk in the passage."

As Mrs. Sheppard was plainly bent upon talking, Maud concluded she had something to say; and followed her.

"Shut the door, my darling! That's right. How white you look this morning! Dearie, I am more sorry than I can say for what happened last night. Giles told me about it. But he says he is quite willing now to let bygones be bygones. So you won't bear malice, darling; will you? Of course I know he ought not to have done it," with a slightly uneasy glance at her daughter's rigid face. "I told him so. But he assured me he only did it for your good, dear. And he seems to think that you were rather rude to him earlier in the day. He is old-fashioned, you know. He thinks a whipping clears the air, so to speak. It's better anyhow than saving up grievance after grievance, isn't it, dear? You'll start afresh now, and be much better friends. At least it won't be his fault if you're not. He is quite ready to treat you as his own daughter."

She paused for breath.

Maud was standing stiff and cold against the door. "Is that what you called me in here to say?" she asked.

Mrs. Sheppard still looked uneasy though she tried to laugh it off. "Not quite all, dear. But I really should go and make friends with him if I were you. He isn't a bit angry with you any more. In fact he has been joking about it, says his arm is so stiff this morning he can hardly use it. You couldn't possibly keep it up if you heard him."

"I shall not hear him," said Maud.

White and proud she faced her mother, and the latter's half-forced merriment died away.

"Child, don't look so tragic! What is it? Come, he didn't hurt you so badly surely! Can't you forgive and forget?"

"No," Maud said. "I shall never do either. I am going away with Bunny to-day. And I hope with all my heart-that I shall never see his face again."

"Going away?" Mrs. Sheppard opened startled eyes. "But, Maud-"

"I am going to marry Jake Bolton," Maud said, her voice very deep and quiet. "He will take me and Bunny too."

"Oh, my dear. That man!" Her mother gazed at her in consternation. "He-he is infinitely rougher than Giles," she said.

"I know he is rough. But he cares for Bunny. That matters most," said Maud. "In fact, I believe he likes Bunny best!"

"My dear, it's you he wants-not Bunny," said Mrs. Sheppard, with a rare flash of insight. "I saw that at the very beginning of things-at our wedding-party. He looked at you as if he could devour you."

Maud put out a quick hand of protest. "Mother, please! That doesn't prove he cares about me any more than I care for him. It-it's just the way with men of his sort. He-he has been very kind, and he is genuinely fond of Bunny, and-and-in fact it's the only thing to be done. I can't-possibly-stay here any longer."

Her lip quivered unexpectedly. She turned to go. But her mother intercepted her quickly, endearingly.

"Maud, darling, wait a minute! I haven't finished. You took my breath away. But listen a moment! This sacrifice won't be necessary, I am sure, I am sure. You couldn't marry that horsey creature. You would never bear life with him. You are not adaptable enough nor experienced enough. You could never endure it. It would be infinitely worse than poor Giles and his tantrums. No, but listen, dear! If you really feel you must go, I think a way of escape is going to be offered to you and poor little Bunny too. I have had a letter from your Uncle Edward, and he is coming expressly to see you both."

"Mother!" Maud almost tore herself free, gazing at her with that in her eyes that was to haunt Mrs. Sheppard for many days. "Oh, why, why, why didn't you tell me before? When did the letter come?"

"It was last night, darling. You were such a long way off-right at the top of the house-and I was too tired to go after you-I meant to tell you first thing, dear; but when I went to look for you after breakfast, you had gone. I am very sorry, but really it wasn't my fault. Still, you won't want to marry that vulgar person now, for I am sure your uncle means to make provision for you. He can well afford it. He is very wealthy."

But Maud resolutely put her mother's clinging arms away from her. "Jake is not vulgar," she said in a voice that sounded flat and tired. "And I have promised to marry him. Nothing can make any difference to that now."

"My dear! What nonsense! I will get Giles to talk to him. How can you dream of such a thing, you who might have married Lord Saltash-and may yet! There is no knowing. Maud, dearest, you must be reasonable. You must indeed. This Jake Bolton may be a very excellent man, a very worthy man, but as a husband for you he would be utterly unsuitable. Surely you can see that for yourself! I can't imagine what possessed you to entertain such an idea for a moment. It was rank presumption on his part to dare to lift his eyes to you. Why, my dear, if you were to marry him your life would be an absolute thralldom. You mustn't think of it, dear child. You mustn't indeed. Why, he is not much better than a stable-boy. And his speech-

"He has spent a good deal of his time among cowboys." Maud was still firmly trying to disengage herself. "His speech is more or less acquired. In any case-in any case-I have given him my promise. And you had better not let Mr. Sheppard interfere. It would be wise of him to keep out of Jake's way in fact. Jake knows exactly why I am prepared to marry him."

"My dear! You actually made a confidant of that dreadful person! How could you?"

"I wanted a man to protect me," Maud said very bitterly, "from the vindictive savagery of a brute!"

"Maud! How can you talk so? And I am sure Jake Bolton is much more of a brute than poor Giles. Why, look at the man! Look at his mouth, his eyes! They absolutely stamp him. Oh, dear, you're very headstrong and difficult. I begin to think Giles had some excuse after all. Perhaps your uncle will be able to manage you. You are quite beyond me."

Maud almost laughed. "When does he arrive?" she asked.

"This evening. He has asked us to reserve a room for him." Mrs. Sheppard had speedily developed a proprietary interest in the management of the hotel. Its welfare had become far more engrossing than that of her children.

Maud opened the door. "We shall be gone by that time. Jake's finding us rooms somewhere in the town."

Mrs. Sheppard held up her hands. "Jake finding rooms! Maud! how-scandalous! How do you know-you don't know! – that he is to be trusted?"

Maud made a brief gesture as of one who submits to the inevitable. "I trust him," she said, with that in her voice that stilled all further protest.

And with the words she passed with finality out of her mother's room, and went away upstairs without a backward glance.

Mrs. Sheppard sat down and shed a few petulant tears over her child's waywardness. "She never would listen to advice," was the burden of her lament. "If she had, she would have been happily married to Lord Saltash by now, and I might have had my house in London to-day. Oh dear, oh dear! Children are a bitter disappointment. They never can be made to see what is for their own good. She'll rue the day. I know she will. That trainer man has a will of iron. He'll break her to it like one of his horses. My poor, proud Maud!"

CHAPTER XV

THE CLOSED DOOR

A way of escape! A way of escape! How often during the hours of that endless day were those words in Maud's mind. They pursued her, they mocked her, whichever way she turned.

To Jake she merely very briefly imparted the news of her uncle's expected advent, and he received it without comment.

Bunny was much more speculative. He had been somewhat carried out of himself by the trend of events. It was Jake who whispered to him the amazing information of his sudden conquest, together with a very strenuous injunction not to talk to Maud about it unless she started the subject. And Maud, for some reason, could not start it. She went through all the necessary arrangements for their removal as one in a dream, scarcely speaking at all, responding very occasionally to Bunny's eager surmises respecting the unknown great-uncle who had never before taken the faintest interest in them, or shown himself so much as aware of their existence. His coming did not seem to matter to her. If indeed he were about to offer her a way of escape, it could not matter to her now. The door that led thither had closed, closed in the night, because her mother had been too tired to seek her out and tell her. The irony of it! The bitter cruel irony! She dared not pause to think.

Jake spent a great part of the day with them, working with a will to get them comfortably settled in their new quarters before the fall of the early dusk. After that, he remained to tea; but he devoted almost the whole of his attention to Bunny, who had in fact come to regard it as his right.

He left soon after, refusing to remain for the game of chess for which the lad earnestly pleaded.

"Not to-night, my son! Your brain has got to settle down. It's a deal too lively at present."

He bent over Bunny at parting, and whispered a few words that were inaudible to Maud. Then he turned to go.

She followed him to the outer door. The evening air smote chill and salt upon her, and she shivered involuntarily. Jake stopped to light a cigarette.

"I shan't be coming round to-morrow," he remarked then. "I shall be too busy. But I'll look in on Saturday, and tell you what I've fixed up. Will Sunday morning do all right if I can fix it?"

She shivered again. "Yes," she said.

"Say, you're cold," said Jake gently. "I mustn't keep you standing here. But you really meant that Yes?"

He looked at her, and she saw that his eyes were kindly. She held out her hand with a desperate little smile.

"Yes, I meant it."

His hand closed strongly, sustainingly, upon hers. "Guess there's nothing to be scared of," he said. "I'll take care of you, sure."

She felt a sudden lump rise in her throat, and found she could not speak.

"You're tired," said Jake softly. "Go and get a good night! It's what you're wanting."

"Yes, I am tired," she managed to say.

He still held her hand, looking at her with those strange, glittering eyes of his that seemed to pierce straight through all reserve and enter even the hidden inner sanctuary of her soul.

"What's this relative of yours like now?" he asked unexpectedly.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I've never seen him."

"Think he's coming along to offer you a home?" asked Jake.

Her face burned suddenly and hotly. For some reason she resented the question. "I don't know. How can I possibly know?"

"All right," said Jake imperturbably. "But in case he does, I'd like you to know that you are at liberty to do as you please in the matter. He'll tell you, maybe, that I'm not the man for you. That, I

gather, is your mother's attitude. I sensed it from the beginning. If he does, and if you feel inclined to agree with him, you're free to do so, – free as air. But at the same time, I'd like you to remember that if you should accept anything from him and then not find it to your liking, you can still come along to me and follow out the original programme. I'm only wanting to make you comfortable."

He stopped; and in the pause that followed, Maud's other hand came out to him, shyly yet impulsively. "You are-such a good fellow!" she said with a catch in her voice.

"Oh, bunkum!" said Jake, in a tone of almost indignant remonstrance.

He held her two hands, and turning, spat forth his cigarette into the night; an action of primitive simplicity that filled Maud with a grotesque kind of horrified mirth, mirth so intense that she had a sudden, hysterical desire to laugh. She restrained herself with a desperate effort.

"Good night!" she said, with something of urgency in her voice. "It isn't bunkum at all. It's the truth. You-I think you are the best friend I ever had. But-but-"

"But-" said Jake.

She freed her hands with a little gasp. "Nothing," she said. "Good night!"

It was a final dismissal, and as such he accepted it. She heard the steady fall of his feet as he went away, and with his going she managed to recover her composure.

There was an undeniable greatness about him that seemed to dwarf all criticism. She realized that to measure him by ordinary standards was out of the question, and as she reviewed all that he had done for her that day a gradual warmth began to glow in her. There was no other friend in all her world who would have extended to her so firm or so comforting a support in her hour of adversity. And if her face burned at the memory of her own utter collapse in his presence, she could but recall with gratitude and with confidence the steadfast kindness with which he had upheld her. She had gone to him in anguished despair, and he had offered her the utmost that he had to offer. As to his motives for so doing, she had a feeling that he had deliberately refrained from expressing them. He wanted her and he wanted Bunny. Perhaps he was lonely. Perhaps years of wandering had created in him a longing for home and domestic comfort.

But she did not speculate very deeply upon that subject. She felt that she could not. There was something in the man's nature, something colossal of which she was but dimly aware, and which she had no means of gauging, that checked her almost at the outset. She found herself standing before a closed door, a door which she had neither the audacity nor the desire to attempt to open. She was even a little fearful lest one day that door should open to her of its own accord and she should be constrained to enter whether she would or not.

But on the whole that talk with Jake had calmed her. The man was so temperate, so completely master of himself, and withal so staunch in the friendship he had established with her, that she could not but feel reassured. There was a delicacy in his consideration for her that warmed her heart. She knew by every instinct of her being that he would take care of her as he had promised. And she wanted someone to take care of her so badly, so badly.

She was so deadly tired of fending for herself.

She found Bunny in a mood of remarkable docility, and she managed to get him to bed without much trouble. He also was worn out after two nights of restlessness, and he fell asleep earlier than usual.

She herself sat for awhile in the little sitting-room with a book, but she found she could not read. She was too tired to fix her attention, and the thought of Jake kept intruding itself whenever she attempted to do so. It was wonderful how she had come to rely upon him, knowing so little of him. He had always been far more to Bunny than to her.

She was drifting into a kind of semi-doze, still with the memory of him passing and repassing through her brain, when there came the sound of a bell in the house, and almost immediately after, the opening of the sitting-room door.

She started up in surprise to see her landlady usher in a little, spare grey-whiskered man who walked with a strut and cleared his throat as he came with a noise like the growling of a dog. He made her think irresistibly of a Scotch terrier bristling for a fight.

He halted in the middle of the room, and banged with his umbrella on the floor, as one demanding a hearing.

"Hullo!" he said. "My name's Warren. You, I take it, are Maud Brian. If so, I'm your Uncle Edward."

Maud came forward, still feeling a little dazed. Since Jake's departure she had almost forgotten the approaching advent of this relative of hers.

"How do you do?" she said. "Yes, I am Maud Brian. Come and sit down!"

He took her hand, looking at her with small grey eyes that were keenly critical.

"How old are you?" he demanded.

"I am twenty-five," said Maud, faintly smiling.

He uttered a grunting growl and sat down with a jerk. "I've come straight from your mother to talk to you. She's a fool, always was. I hope you're not another."

"Thank you," said Maud sedately.

He brought his shaggy grey brows together. "I've come the length of England to see you, but I haven't any time to waste. I'm going back to-morrow. That letter of yours-I meant to answer it, but business pressed, and it had to stand over. Then I decided to come and see what sort of young woman you were before I did anything further. I couldn't stand a replica of your mother in my house. But-thank goodness-you're not much like her. She tells me you're thinking of making a marriage of convenience to get away from your step-father. Now, that's a very serious step for a young woman to contemplate. It seems to me I've turned up in the nick of time."

Maud, sitting facing him with her hands folded in her lap, still faintly smiled. The bluntness with which he tackled the situation appealed more to her sense of humour than to any other emotion. She realized that he was actually about to offer her a way of escape, but, curiously, she no longer felt any desire to avail herself of it. By his generous assurance that she was at liberty to do as she would, Jake had somehow managed to range her on his side. She did not want to escape any more. Moreover, there was Bunny to be thought of. She knew well in what direction his desires-and his welfare also-lay.

"It was very kind of you to come," she said. "But, as regards my marriage, my mind is quite made up. He-the man I am going to marry-understands everything. I have been quite open with him. He has been most kind, most generous. I could not think of drawing back now."

"Pshaw!" said Mr. Warren. He sat forward in his chair, his hands gripping the knob of his umbrella and surveyed her with growing disapproval. "You're prepared to sell yourself to a man you don't love in return for a home, hey?" he asked.

She winced sharply, and in a moment her tired young face was flooded with colour. "Certainly not!" she said, her voice very low. "Most certainly not!"

"Looks uncommonly like it," he maintained.

"It is not so!" she said, with low-toned vehemence. "I have told you-he-understands."

"And is prepared to give all and receive nothing for his pains?" pursued the old man relentlessly. "If so, he's a very remarkable young man; and let me tell you for your comfort, it's an attitude he won't keep up for long, not-that is-unless he's a blithering idiot? Is he an idiot?"

Maud almost laughed. "No, that he is not! But really-really-you are wasting your time. If you had come this time yesterday, I would have listened to you. To-night it is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Because I have promised."

"Tut! tut! He must release you."

"He would release me," Maud said slowly. "That is just it."

"Just what? Talk sense if you can!" It was evident that patience was not Uncle Edward's strong point. He fidgeted his umbrella testily.

She looked at him with her clear, straight eyes. "That is just why I will not ask for my release. In fact, I-don't want it."

"Don't want it! Then, young woman, you're in love with him. I've come on a fool's errand, and I'll wish you good night."

He was on his feet with the words. Maud rose too. She laid a hand of half-timid restraint upon his arm.

"I am not-in love with him, Uncle Edward," she said, her voice not wholly steady. "Such a thing would be impossible. But at the same time-though I can't give him everything-he shall not repent his bargain. We are going to be-friends."

"Pshaw!" said Uncle Edward again. He gripped her hand unexpectedly, staring up at her with his keen eyes. "Do you know how old I am?" he said.

She shook her head.

"I'm eighty," he said. "I've seen a little of men in my time, and I've been a man myself. So let me tell you this! There's not a man on this earth who could be satisfied for long with that kind of farce. You've got him on the leash now. He's tame and good. But there's a ravening wolf inside us all, my dear, when we're thwarted, and the longer we're thwarted the more savage we get. You can't bring up a wolf-not the tamest wolf in the world-on bread and butter. Sooner or later he'll begin to feel a bit empty, and whine for the real thing. And if you still go on starving the brute till he's famished, he'll either break away and go elsewhere for food, or else he'll round on you one day and tear you in pieces. You'll be the sufferer either way. It's nature I tell you, it's nature. You'll have to give all or drive him away at the outset. There can't be half-measures with a man who is a man. If you offer them you must expect trouble. And remember, it's always the woman who pays in the end, – always the woman who pays."

He repeated the words with the impressiveness of a judge pronouncing sentence.

Maud was trembling, though she tried to conceal the fact. "And then there is Bunny to be thought of," she said.

"Bunny? Who is Bunny? Oh, your brother, is it? And he's a hopeless cripple, I understand? Is it for his sake that you've hatched this mad scheme?"

"In a great measure. You see, he and-and Jake Bolton are very fond of one another."

"Pshaw!" the old man exclaimed. "So this Jake Bolton is to have the boy, with you thrown in as a makeweight; is that it? And you think you're all going to be happy together, do you? Never heard such a tomfool scheme in my life. Where does this Jake Bolton hang out? I'll go and have a talk to him."

"Oh, please don't!" Maud begged. "He'll think I sent you. And really-really there is nothing to discuss."

"We'll see about that," he rejoined grimly. "Seems to me it's high time somebody came along and interfered. Now, look here, what's your name? – Maud! I'm going to get you out of this mess. You shan't marry a man you don't love just because there was no other way out. There is another way out, and you're to take it. You're to come and live with me, do you hear? You and your precious Bunny too! And when I die, I'll leave you both provided for. See? Come, I can't say fairer than that."

He was still gripping her hand, and looking at her with shrewd eyes under their beetling brows as though prepared to beat down all opposition. There was a look of Bunny about those eyes, Bunny in a difficult mood. She recognized it with a sigh. It seemed her fate to be continually doing battle with someone, and she felt wholly unfitted for it. All she asked of life was peace and quietness.

"My home is a dingy one," said her uncle, "but you may be able to make it more cheerful. I shan't interfere with either of you. Come, now, you're going to be a sensible girl, hey? I'm sorry I didn't turn up before. But the knot isn't tied, so I'm not too late. We must explain the situation to the young man. Unless he's an absolute bounder, he'll be amenable to reason."

But Maud shook her head. "I can't do it, Uncle Edward. I know you mean to be kind. I am very grateful. But-I can't."

He rasped his throat aggressively. "That's nonsense," he said with decision. "Plainly the man is beneath you. You say you don't love him, and never could."

"I am not-altogether-sure that he is beneath me," she said rather wistfully.

"But you don't love him?" her uncle insisted, scanning her piercingly.

She bent her head with an instinctive desire to avoid his eyes. "No."

"Or anyone else?" he pursued.

She made a small movement of protest.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, in the tone of one who has discovered something. "Your mother hinted as much. And you think you're going to make things better for yourself by marriage with a rank outsider. Is that it? Is that it? Then take my word for it, you're going to make the biggest mistake of your life. And if you persist in it, I've done with you. At least, no, I haven't done; for I'm going straight to that young man of yours to tell him the sort of bargain he's going to make."

He paused, for suddenly Maud had drawn herself up very straight and proud. "If you wish to do so, you must," she said, and her pale face was very regal and composed. "But it will not make the smallest difference to either of us. Jake has my promise. I have his."

It was at this point that the door opened again to admit the landlady with a note on a salver.

"Mr. Bolton's compliments," she said, "and will you be good enough to send back an answer?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE CHAMPION

Maud took the note with a glance at her uncle.

"Open it!" he said. "Don't mind me!" and stumped irately to the bay-window and pulled aside the blind.

Maud opened the note. Her hands were not very steady. The envelope contained a half-sheet of notepaper with a few words scrawled thereupon, and a short length of string.

"Sorry to trouble you," ran the note. "But will you tie a knot in the enclosed to show me the size of your wedding finger? Yours, Jake."

She looked up from the note as her uncle came tramping back. "Is it the young man himself?" he demanded.

"It's Mr. Bolton, sir," said the landlady.

"Then show him in!" ordered the old man autocratically. "Show him in, and we'll get it over! No time like the present."

A swift remonstrance rose to Maud's lips, but she did not utter it. The landlady looked to her for confirmation of the order, but she did not utter a single word.

"Get along!" commanded Uncle Edward. "Or I'll fetch him in myself!"

A whiff of tobacco-smoke came in through the open door. Maud stood very still, listening. A moment later there came the sound of a pipe being tapped on the heel of a boot, and then the firm, quiet tread of Jake's feet in the passage.

He entered. "I didn't mean to disturb you again, but I'd forgotten this little detail and I've got to catch an early train." He turned with no sign of surprise and regarded Maud's visitor. "Good evening, sir!" he said.

Mr. Warren gave him a brief nod. Maud still stood mute, Jake's note with the piece of string dangling therefrom in her hand.

He went quietly to her. "Say! Let me fix that for you!" he said.

She suffered him to take her hand. It lay cold and quivering in his. He wound the string round her third finger and knotted it. Then he slipped it off, and took the hand closely and warmly into his own.

"I hope you haven't come to forbid the banns," he said, calmly returning the grim scrutiny that the old man had levelled at him from the moment of his entrance.

Uncle Edward uttered a sound indicative of intense disgust. "I? Oh, I've no authority," he said. "I disapprove-if that's what you mean. Any decent person would disapprove of the sort of alliance you two are determined to make. But I don't expect my opinion to be deferred to. If you choose to marry a woman who doesn't care two straws about you, it's your affair, not mine."

Jake turned in his deliberate fashion to Maud. "Your uncle, I presume?" he said.

"Yes," she made answer.

His face wore a smile that baffled her, as he said: "It's my opinion that we should get on better alone together, though it's for you to decide."

She looked at him rather piteously, and as if in answer to that look Jake slipped a steady arm about her.

"What about the head of the family?" he said, speaking softly almost as if to a child. "Reckon he'll be wanting you. Won't you go to him?"

The slight pressure of his arm directed her towards the door. She yielded to it instinctively, with an abrupt feeling that the matter had been taken out of her hands.

He went with her into the passage, and they stood for a moment together under the flickering lamp.

"Bunny in bed?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

He was still faintly smiling. "You go to bed too, my girl!" he said. "I'll settle this old firebrand."

"Don't-quarrel with him, Jake!" she said nervously.

"What should I quarrel about?" said Jake. "Good night, forlorn princess!"

His voice had a note in it that was almost motherly. She went, from him with a distinct sense of comfort. His touch had been so strong and withal so gentle.

As for Jake, he turned back into the room with the utmost confidence and shut himself in with an air of decision.

"Now, sir," he said, "if you've any complaint to make, p'raps you'll be good enough to mention it to me right now, and I'll deal with the same. I'm not going to have my girl bullied any more."

His voice was quiet, even slightly drawling, but his eyes shone with something of a glare. He came straight to the old man, who still leaned on his umbrella, and stood before him.

The latter gazed at him ferociously, and for a space they remained thus, stubbornly fixing each other. Then abruptly the old man spoke.

"You're very masterful, young fellow-my-lad. I suppose you think yourself one of the lords of creation, good enough for anybody, hey?"

Jake's stern face relaxed slowly. "I don't claim to be a prince of the blood," he said, "but I reckon I've got some-points."

"And you reckon you're good enough to marry my niece?" snapped Uncle Edward.

Jake squared his shoulders. "I shall make her a better husband than some," he said.

The old man smote the floor with his umbrella. "Shall you? And has she told you that she's in love with another man?"

Jake's right hand went suddenly deep into his pocket and remained there. "I am aware that she was once," he said, speaking very deliberately. "But that is over. Also, he was not the man for her."

"A scoundrel, hey? Not a sound man like yourself?" There was a malicious note in the query, but Jake ignored it.

"He does not count anyway," he said, with finality. "If he did, your niece wouldn't have come to me for protection. I believe she appealed to you first, but you had more important things to attend to. With me it was otherwise, and so I consider that I have a greater right to be her protector than anyone else in the world."

"Do you?" said Uncle Edward. "That means you're in love with her, I suppose?"

Jake's eyes fenced with his. "You may take it to mean that if it pleases you to do so," he said.

The old man raked his throat pugnaciously. "It's damn' presumption. I tell you that," he said.

"That may be," said Jake, unmoved.

"But it doesn't alter your intentions, hey? You're one of the cussed sort, I can see. Well, look here, young man! I'll make you a proposal. You seem to think I've neglected my duty, though heaven knows these Brians have no claims on me. But I've taken a fancy to the girl. She's gentle, which is more than can be said for most of your modern young women. So you just listen to me for a minute! You're on a wrong tack altogether. Courting should come before marriage, not after. You may marry first and you may think for a time that all is going to be well between you, but there'll come a day when you'll wake up and find that in spite of all you haven't won her. And that'll mean misery for you both. Don't you do it, young man! You'll find the game's not worth the candle. You have a little patience! Let the girl come to me for a bit! I may be old, but I'll protect her. And if you care to come after her, and do a little courting now and then, well-it's not a very brilliant match for her, but I shan't forbid it."

He ceased to speak. There seemed to be a smile in the eyes that watched him, but there was no suggestion of it about Jake's mouth, which was slightly compressed.

"That's all very well, sir," he said in his slow quiet way. "But have you laid this proposal of yours before Miss Brian herself?"

Uncle Edward made a sound of impatience. "She can think of no one but her brother. She'll agree fast enough when she realizes that it's the only thing to do."

"Will she?" said Jake. "And have you put it to her in that light?"

The old man coughed and made no reply.

Jake went on with the utmost composure. "You offer her a home where she can continue to be a slave to her brother. You don't propose to lift the burden at all, to ease her life, to make her happy. You wouldn't know where to begin. You are ready and anxious to deliver her from me. But there your goodness starts and finishes. You talk of my damnable presumption." A ruddy glitter like the flicker of a flame dispelled the hint of humour from the lynx-like eyes. "That is just your point of view. But I reckon I'm nearer to her-several lengths nearer-than you or any other man. She hasn't brought all her troubles to you and cried her heart out in your arms, has she? No, – nor ever will-now! You've come too late, sir, – too late by just twelve hours! You may keep your money and your home to yourself! The girl is mine."

A deep note suddenly sounded in the man's voice, and Uncle Edward was abruptly made aware of a lion in his path.

He backed at once. He had not the smallest desire for an encounter with the savage beast.

"Tut, tut!" he said. "You talk like a Red Indian. I wasn't proposing to deprive you of her; only to give the girl a free hand and you the chance of winning her. If you take her without, there'll be the devil to pay sooner or later; I can tell you that. But, if you won't take the chance I offer, that's your affair entirely. I have no more to say."

"I am taking a different sort of chance," Jake said. "And I have a suspicion that it's less of a gamble than the one you suggest. In any case, I've put my money on it, and there it'll stay."

He looked Uncle Edward straight in the eyes a moment, and then broke into his sudden, disarming smile.

"Can't you stop over the week-end now and give her away?" he asked persuasively. "Her mother seems to shy at the notion."

"Her mother always was a fool," said Uncle Edward irascibly. Here at least was a safe object upon which to vent his indignation! "The biggest fool that ever lived! What on earth men found to like in her I never could understand. Oh yes, I'll give the girl away. If you're so set on getting married at once, I'd better stop and see that it's done properly. Lucy never did anything properly in her life."

"Thank you," said Jake. "You are most kind-and considerate."

"Mark you, that doesn't mean that I approve," warned the old man. "It's a hare-brained scheme altogether, but I suppose I owe it to my family to see that it's done on the square."

Jake had suddenly become extremely suave. "That is very benevolent of you, sir," he said.

"I regard it as my duty," said Uncle Edward gruffly.

He had never been called benevolent before, and the term was not altogether to his liking. It seemed safer to accept it, however, without question. There was an unknown element about this young man that was in some fashion formidable. An odd respect mingled with his first contempt. The fellow might be a bounder, – he was not absolutely decided upon that head-but, as he himself had modestly stated, he had some points. By marrying him, his young niece was about to commit a very rash act, but it was possible-just possible-that it might not lead to utter disaster. It was not a marriage of which he could approve, but the man seemed solid, and certainly he himself had no urgent desire to take in the girl and her cripple brother. Altogether, though he did not like to think that his advice had been ignored, and though at the back of his mind there lurked a vague uneasiness not unmixed with self-reproach, it seemed that matters might have been considerably worse.

"Don't you tyrannize over her now!" he said to Jake at parting. "You've got a fighting face, young fellow-my-lad. But you bear in mind, she's a woman, and-unless I am much mistaken-she is not the sort to stand it."

"I don't fight with women, sir," said Jake somewhat curtly. "I've other things to do."

Uncle Edward smiled a dry smile. "And you've a few things to learn-yet," he remarked enigmatically.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WEDDING MORNING

It was very dark and draughty in the church. Maud was shivering from head to foot. Her heart felt as if it were encased in ice. Now and then it beat a little, feebly, as if trying to break free, but the awful cold was too much for it. She did not know how to keep her teeth from chattering. Her hands lay in her lap, numbed and nerveless. She wondered if she would ever manage to walk as far as the dimly lit altar where Jake would be awaiting her.

It was evidently draughty there also. The candles flickered fitfully. Uncle Edward was eyeing the candles with obvious disapproval. She hoped he would manage to suppress it at close quarters. She was sure she would have to laugh if he didn't, and laughter, she felt, would be fatal.

How different this from the wedding-day which once she had dared to picture for herself! It was like a mocking fantasy, a dreadful travesty of that which might have been. Like an arc of prismatic colours it hung before her-the vision of that other wedding-the wedding of her dreams; the sunshine and the laughter and the flowers! The shining altar, the waiting bridegroom, his flashing smile of welcome! She saw it all-she saw it all!

How dear he had been to her! How, unutterably dear! And she remembered how in those far-off days he had always called her his Queen Rose.

Her heart gave a swift throb that was anguish. She stood up with a quick, involuntary movement. She had not dreamed that this long-past trouble possessed the power to hurt her so. She cast a desperate glance around her. This waiting in the cold and the dark had become intolerable. A wild impulse to flee-to flee-was upon her. The door was quite near. She turned towards it.

But in that moment Uncle Edward cleared his throat and rose.

"Here comes your precious bridegroom!" he said. "I suppose they're ready at last. We had better get moving."

And then it was that Maud's knees abruptly refused to support her, and she sank down again white and powerless on the chair by the door.

Jake's sturdy figure was coming down the aisle. She watched it with eyes that were wide and fixed.

He came straight to her, bent over her. "I'm real sorry you've been kept waiting," he said, in his womanly drawl. "It's the parson's doing. He forgot all about us. And there was no fire either. I had to force the door of the stoke shed to light it."

He bent a little lower over her, and suddenly she felt his hand against the icy cold of her cheek. She started back from it.

"Jake, I-can't come yet. I'm so cold." Stiffly her pale lips whispered the words; her whole body seemed bound in a very rigour of cold. And through it all she still thought she could hear phantom echoes of that other wedding that once had seemed so near.

"Where is your mother?" said Jake.

There was a hint of sternness in the question. Uncle Edward answered it.

"I'm expecting them every minute. I drove up first to fetch Maud. Lucy is a hopeless fool. She's never in time for anything."

Even as he spoke, there came the rush of wheels on the hard road outside and the hoot of a motor horn.

The sound as it reached Maud, seemed to galvanize her into sudden energy. She rose, white to the lips but resolute. "I am ready," she said.

Jake gave her a straight, hard look, and turned without another word. He went back up the aisle, square, purposeful, steady, and took up his stand by the waiting clergyman.

Maud's hand pressed her uncle's arm with urgency. "Let us go! Let us go!" she said. "I can see my mother-afterwards."

The old man also gave her a shrewd glance, but he also said no word. Only as he stumped up the aisle beside her, he took the girlish hand upon his arm and held it hard in his gnarled fingers.

They had reached the chancel steps where the clergyman awaited them ere the opening of the door and the sound of fluttering feet announced the arrival of Maud's mother. A heavier tread and a man's loud whisper and barely muffled laugh testified to the presence of Giles Sheppard also.

Uncle Edward cleared his throat ferociously, releasing Maud's hand with a mighty squeeze as Jake came to her side. Then he turned with deliberation and scowled upon the advancing couple.

Maud did not turn. Her face was white and still as the face of a marble statue. Her eyes stared blankly at the flickering candles on the altar. Had Jake lighted those candles, she wondered, as well as the fire in the stoke shed?

She heard her mother's step behind her, but still she did not move; and after the briefest pause the clergyman began to read the service.

It was all horribly unreal. The only thing of which she was vividly and poignantly conscious was the cold. She heard Jake's voice beside her, very calm and steady, and when her turn came she spoke with equal steadiness, for somehow she seemed to be imbued with his strength. But she was too frozen, too ice-bound, to feel any meaning in the words she uttered. She spoke them like an automaton, through lips that would scarcely move.

Jake's hand, warm and purposeful, holding her own, sent a faint, faint glow through her; but it did not reach her heart. She thought it had ceased to beat long ago, and she wondered how soon he would realize that he was wedded to a dead woman, what he would say when he knew. For Jake was so essentially full-blooded, so burningly alive. He was the most virile person she had ever met. Standing there by his side, she could feel the warmth of him. She thought it was that alone that kept her from turning into a solid block of ice.

When she knelt, his hand came under her elbow and supported her; when she rose, it lifted her. When the dreadful nightmare service was over at last, his arm was round her, and by its aid alone she stumbled stiffly to the vestry.

The young curate who had married them looked at her with nervous solicitude. He had been recently married himself, and he had a painfully vivid memory of the agonies thereof.

He set a chair for her, and Jake put her down into it. Then he stood up and took command of the situation.

"Get a glass from somewhere!" he said to the curate. "And you, sir," he turned upon Uncle Edward, "don't let that man come in here! Her mother can if she likes, but I won't have anyone else."

He stooped over Maud, looking closely into her deathlike face. He took her frozen hands and held them up to his lips, breathing on them.

Her great eyes gazed up at him in mute apology. She felt he had begun to find out.

"It's all right, my girl," he said in answer, "all right."

And then her mother came to her, and surprised Maud at least by folding her close in her arms and fondly kissing her poor numbed lips.

"Why, Maudie, darling," she murmured to her tenderly as though she were a child again, "what is it, dearie? What is it?"

The words, the embrace, moved Maud, piercing straight to her frozen heart. She turned with a passionate, inarticulate sound and hid her face on her mother's breast.

"My precious! My own girlie!" said Mrs. Sheppard; and gathered her closer still.

There followed a brief, brief interval of peace while she rested in the sheltering arms that had not held her since her babyhood. Then she heard Jake's voice close to her bowed head.

"Maud, I want you to drink this."

She stirred uneasily, and was aware of her mother's tears dropping on her face.

Then again came Jake's voice, quite courteous but extremely decided. "I am afraid I must trouble you, Mrs. Sheppard. She is half-dead with cold."

Mrs. Sheppard gave a little sob and relaxed her hold. "Maud-my darling, here is some brandy and water. Will you try and drink it? Mother will hold the glass."

But it was Jake's hand that held it, guiding it steadily to the cold, blue lips; and it was in response to his insistence, and not of her own volition at all, that Maud drank the fiery mixture he had prepared.

She shuddered over it, but it revived her almost immediately. She felt the blood begin to stir in her veins, her heart begin to beat.

"That's right," said Jake, and she saw his smile for the first time that wintry morning and felt the better for it. "Now, sit quiet for a minute or two till you feel well enough to sign the register! Mrs. Sheppard, I think your husband wants to speak to you."

"Oh, dear!" sobbed Mrs. Sheppard. "He's always wanting something."

Maud gently released herself. "You had better go to him, Mother, dear. You can bring him in if you like. I am quite all right now."

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